Mafia Mask 301

Chapter 301: Insurance Policy

Dominic’s POV

I decided to speak with my mother while the others worked on resolving the situation with Gemma. I needed to stop Marcus, but couldn’t do that without discussing it with Mom and Nadia first. So I invited her to lunch at her favorite upscale restaurant in the neutral zone.

"Look who finally remembers his mother! Recently back from your business trip and only now you call me," Mom teased as she arrived, her eyes sparkling despite her complaint. Even at her age, she carried herself with the dignity of a former mafia queen.

"Mom, I brought you to your favorite place," I said, kissing her cheek before pulling out her chair at our private booth.

"Well, in that case, you’re forgiven." She smiled warmly. "How was your trip, darling? Did you find the clarity you were looking for?"

"That, plus some excellent opportunities for expanding our operations. The trip was productive."

"You were gone quite a while," she noted, studying my face with those perceptive eyes that had once helped her navigate the treacherous waters of family politics.

I hesitated before asking, "Not too long, I hope. I heard Gemma is seeing someone now."

"She loves you, Dominic. If she’s with someone else, then fight for her. Are you really going to surrender that easily?"

"No," I said with the determination that had earned me my position as Capo. "I’m not giving up."

The waiter approached our table, and we ordered our meals. As he walked away, I noticed my mother watching me with that perceptive look that always made me feel like she could see straight through my carefully constructed defenses.

"Out with it, Dominic. What do you want?" She tilted her head. "I know you better than you know yourself."

I sighed, glancing around to ensure our conversation remained private. "Mom, Marcus is causing trouble again."

"You should have had him eliminated years ago. Like you told him, he's nothing but a disgrace to the family name."

My eyebrows shot up. "You know about that confrontation?"

"You were at Gregory's, Dominic. Everyone in our circle dines there. A friend overheard everything and told me about it." She shook her head. "What are you planning to do?"

"I'm not sure yet. What would you suggest?"

"Talk to Jude. He has what you need to put your father behind bars where he belongs, or better yet, six feet under."

That caught me off guard. "What exactly does Jude have?"

"Evidence." When I looked confused, she continued, "When that incident happened years ago, Caleb's father helped me handle it. I made mistakes, Dominic, but you remember how unstable Nadia was then. Anything related to your father would send her spiraling into complete breakdown. He had such psychological control over her."

"I remember. We even considered having her committed to a private facility. Her depression was crippling."

"Exactly. As her mother, I was desperate and ended up protecting that monster because of her fragile mental state. But Caleb's father managed to resolve everything with Jude's assistance. Then he passed away shortly after, and Jude kept all the documentation. Including video evidence of that violation." Disgust filled her expression. "Dominic, it wasn't his first time, and I doubt it was his last."

The information left me stressed and deeply concerned about what other atrocities my father might have committed.

"Did you know he pulled strings to silence those harassment accusations from the girls at the Social Union? Even convinced a judge on our payroll to pressure his own daughter into staying quiet."

"No, I had no idea." My anger intensified with each revelation about the man who shared my blood.

"If you're going to move against him, be smarter and more ruthless than he is. Build an airtight case before you strike."

"I understand. I have detectives on our payroll willing to help."

"That's good."

"What about Nadia? How will she handle this when it goes public?"

"We've already had that difficult conversation. She wants us to do the right thing this time. We need to protect Gemma from him."

I exhaled slowly. "So you already know about his threats against her too."

"Gregory's," she reminded me with a small smile, referencing her well-connected friend who'd witnessed my father's menacing behavior.

My phone rang—Zoe's name flashing on the screen. I answered and listened, my blood pressure rising with each word she reported. By the time I hung up, I was ready to commit murder.

"What happened?" Mom asked, alarmed by the murderous expression on my face.

"That was Zoe. She's with Gemma. My father has been calling her repeatedly since I got back. He won't leave her alone."

Mom's face hardened with the cold fury of a woman who had once ordered executions. "Then make him stop permanently."

After lunch, we went directly to Nadia's house in the secured family compound. To my surprise, my sister was remarkably composed and resolute about our next steps.

"Brother, I've cut that man out of my life completely. It took years, and I'm still working through the trauma, but after everything I've learned, I just want him gone," Nadia said with newfound steel in her voice. "I have a daughter, Dominic. I can't imagine how I'd feel if someone like him did to her what he does to other women. End this now."

"Are you sure, Nadia? I just want to make certain you're prepared for what's coming and that you'll be mentally stable."

"Absolutely. Gerard already has a media strategy planned to control any fallout. Just keep him away from Gemma." She squeezed my arm. "And cut off his allowance immediately. Leave him with nothing."

"When I do that, he'll go ballistic and probably get desperate," I warned.

"Don't worry about that," Gerard said, entering the room with the confidence of a man who controlled half the city's legitimate businesses. "I've already increased security here and for the children. For you too, Bee," he added, approaching my mother with gentle kisses. "Who, by the way, looks more radiant every day."

"Such a charmer, Gerard," Mom replied with a smile.

"I’m the lucky one—my wife resembles her mother and grows more beautiful with time." Gerard kissed Nadia, who gazed at him adoringly. "My only concern is Dominic. You should reconcile with Gemma soon. We need substitute parents to watch the kids when we want to disappear to Sicily. And my sisters are too unpredictable to trust with babysitting!"

"I’m working on it," I assured him with a smile.

"Well, look at this family council meeting!" Vincenzo announced, walking in with his school backpack.

"My prince! Come give nonna a kiss," Mom extended her arms to my nephew, who embraced her happily.

"The most beautiful grandmother in the world!" he declared, making her laugh.

"Such a little flatterer," I teased.

"Don’t be jealous, Uncle," he replied before turning serious. "Good to see you—I was going to call you about something important."

"What’s up?" I asked.

"Aunt Gemma canceled our plans. And this guy Zander, from what I can gather, is top-tier competition. Even Dad can’t compete. According to Aunt Gemma herself, he’s almost perfect. You’d better move fast."

He flopped onto the couch, his words crushing my hopes like a sledgehammer.

"Who’s Zander?" Nadia inquired with concern.

"Some guy dating Aunt Gemma," Vincenzo explained casually, completely unaware of the devastation his words caused.

I felt defeated until my phone lit up with an urgent message from Caleb requesting my immediate presence at his legitimate business office.

"I need to go handle family business," I announced. "Gerard, I'll have my PR team contact yours. We need to coordinate our damage control strategy. This will get messy and bloody."

Gerard nodded grimly, understanding the implications.

When I arrived at Caleb's office, everyone was already assembled, including Daniel and Inspector Adler—our woman on the inside of the police force.

"Is everything resolved with Gemma?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes, she forgave us all," Caleb confirmed. "I sent her home today—she didn't seem well. She'll return to work tomorrow."

"Thank you," I said, relieved that at least one crisis was managed.

"It was the right thing to do. We were unfair to her." Caleb paused. "But there's an issue: she refused security protection."

I frowned at Gemma's stubborn refusal to accept the reality of her dangerous situation.

"We're investigating the escalating threats from her ex-boyfriend. We need to identify who's backing him from the outside," Daniel explained.

"My security team is looking into it as well. I'll connect you with them for coordination," I offered, and Daniel acknowledged with a professional nod.

"Now for our second major problem," Jude began, his expression grave. "Regarding the incident from years ago, I have all the evidence Mr. Thorne gathered—videos, voice recordings, financial records, everything needed for prosecution or permanent elimination."

"How did you get all this without my knowledge?" I questioned.

"I would never betray Bee's trust," Jude explained. "She wanted to protect her children above all else. That's what Mr. Thorne did, and I assisted him in building this insurance policy."

"Have you discussed this explosive evidence with Nadia?" Xavier asked with genuine concern.

"Yes, I just came from her house. She's finally freed herself from his psychological control," I replied.

I opened the folder Jude provided. It contained a comprehensive report with photos, videos, audio recordings, message transcripts, and confidentiality agreements signed by women who had been paid substantial sums to maintain their silence.

"Who arranged these payoff agreements?" I asked, studying the damning documentation.

"Your father, following Mr. Thorne's explicit instructions. Your mother funded the payments. Marcus doesn't have copies—he was just the public face handling negotiations. But I accompanied him and spoke directly with the victims," Jude clarified.

"Can you void these agreements without exposing our family's involvement?" I asked.

"Definitely. I've already spoken with both women. They're ready to testify," Jude confirmed.

"Good." I began reading the detailed report, my disgust and rage mounting with every horrific page of evidence against the man whose blood unfortunately ran through my veins.

Chapter 302: Sickening Truth Revealed

Dominic's POV

I had always known my father was a monster, but the evidence sprawled across Detective Jude's desk revealed something far more depraved than I had imagined. This wasn't just about Marcus's betrayal of Thorne family codes or his exile for embezzlement. This was about crimes that made even hardened mafia soldiers sick to their stomachs.

Years ago, when I had finally managed to buy Marcus out of the family's legitimate businesses, he had blown through the blood money within months and came crawling back for more. When I refused to bankroll his pathetic existence, he had made my life hell through every dirty trick in the book, typical Marcus style. Then suddenly, he had fled to Atlanta and remained relatively quiet until now.

I had never fully understood his abrupt departure from Port Serenity. There had been whispers in the underground about two women who had accused him of sexual assault, but the details had been murky, and the accusers had vanished from sight before any formal charges could be filed. The truth had always remained just beyond my grasp, buried beneath layers of corruption and fear.

Now, staring at Jude's meticulously compiled dossier, everything became crystal clear with nauseating precision. My father, the man whose bloodline ran through my veins, was a serial predator. I forced myself to continue reading, though every word made my blood run cold.

Years back, while masquerading as a legitimate businessman with Thorne family connections, Marcus had rented an exclusive oceanfront estate for what he claimed would be a networking event. He had invited his equally reprehensible associates, including several low-level players from rival families who owed him favors. Two young women had attended the gathering, brought along by a friend who happened to be connected to Alfie Atkins's organization.

According to the detective's report, both women had firmly rejected Marcus's advances early in the evening, which had only seemed to intensify his predatory focus. Like the calculating predator he was, he had arranged for a compromised bartender to serve them drinks laced with powerful sedatives. Once the drugs began taking effect, he had isolated them in a secured bedroom where he had sexually assaulted both victims.

The details were absolutely sickening. He had recorded the entire ordeal, violated them extensively, then discarded them the following morning with explicit threats to release the footage and destroy their lives if they dared to speak out against him.

Despite their terror and trauma, the women had found the courage to report him to the authorities. Unfortunately, they had encountered a corrupt cop who saw an opportunity for personal enrichment

rather than justice. The corrupt detective had approached Marcus with a proposition, and that was when my mother had become entangled in this nightmare.

Marcus had threatened my mother with the most effective weapon in his arsenal, claiming he would manipulate my sister Nadia toward self-destruction if she refused to cooperate. Nadia had been extraordinarily vulnerable at that time, suffering from severe depression following a traumatic miscarriage that had nearly broken her spirit. Marcus's psychological influence over her had been considerable, as she had only seen the devoted father figure, completely blind to the monster lurking beneath his mask.

My mother, trapped between protecting Nadia and her own moral compass, had been forced to comply with his demands. She had paid off the corrupt detective and helped bury the evidence that could have put Marcus away for decades. But during this process, she had discovered something even more horrifying: this had not been an isolated incident. Marcus had committed similar crimes in Atlanta before arriving in Port Serenity. My father was a serial rapist who had been operating for years.

When I reached the message transcripts that Jude had recovered from Marcus's seized devices, bile rose in my throat. The exchanges between him and his criminal associates were revolting, filled with their sick laughter about their victims and graphic descriptions of their assaults.

One message stood out for its particular depravity. "I don't give a damn about their complaints," he had written. "Those two were already drunk when they arrived, I just gave them a little something extra to make them more cooperative. They don't even remember what happened. It's their own fault for getting wasted at a private party. I took what they were offering anyway. They were playing hard to get, but they wanted it, and I gave them exactly what they deserved."

"Jesus Christ, this is absolutely disgusting," I slammed the folder shut and hurled it onto the conference table. "Do whatever you have to do to put him away forever."

Detective Jude studied my expression carefully. "You understand there's more than enough evidence here to ensure he spends the rest of his life behind bars, don't you?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you can arrange for him to have an accident in custody. I just want him permanently removed from Gemma's vicinity and away from my family." The words came out steady despite the rage building inside my chest. How could I possibly share DNA with such a repulsive creature? How had my grandfather ever permitted my sweet, gentle mother to marry this predator?

"Dominic, everything will work out," Xavier assured me, placing a steadying hand on my shoulder. "Jude will handle the investigation properly; you don’t need to get personally involved in this mess."

"We’ll try to keep this information confidential as long as possible, Dominic, but your family’s prominence means this will eventually become public knowledge," Detective Jude warned me.

"Keep it under wraps for as long as you can manage. My public relations team will handle damage control for both the company and family reputation," I replied firmly. "More importantly, I want Gemma under constant protection at all times."

"Don’t worry about that," Caleb said with confidence. "I’ve already assigned two of our best security specialists to watch her discreetly."

"She’s going to be furious when she discovers that arrangement," I noted.

Caleb shrugged dismissively. "That’s completely irrelevant. Her safety is the only thing that matters right now."

"Well, we’re heading back to the precinct," Jude announced, rising from his chair with his partner. "We’ll keep you updated on all developments."

"Any specific instructions for us?" Jude asked.

"No, just let us handle the legal proceedings, and thank you for trusting us with this sensitive matter," I replied.

"That’s what loyalty means," Jude said, squeezing my shoulder supportively.

"That and drinking away our troubles afterward," Xavier added with a grim smile. "Let’s head to my place."

"Thanks, Xavier, but I need to return to Zenith Systems. There's still considerable business to handle." I stood up, thanked my associates for their unwavering support, and headed toward the exit.

I desperately needed to see Gemma. The urge was completely overwhelming. I drove directly to her apartment building, but as I was finding a parking space, I spotted her emerging from the main entrance, laughing warmly and embracing a tall, muscular Black man. Zander, I presumed. Vincenzo hadn't been exaggerating when he described the guy as undeniably handsome. I gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white, jealousy consuming me from within like acid.

Gemma appeared completely relaxed and genuinely happy in his company. Perhaps he truly was everything she had described to Vincenzo during their conversations. If he genuinely made her feel secure and content, what right did I have to interfere with her happiness?

I started the engine and pulled away before witnessing their goodbye. I couldn't bear to watch her kissing another man, not after everything we had been through together. Abandoning my work responsibilities entirely, I drove straight to my hotel suite and lost myself in an entire bottle of whiskey, drowning the images of Gemma in another man's arms.

Chapter 303: Was It Real

Gemma's POV

The week dragged by like a death sentence. With some time away from Caleb's legitimate front office, my workload had mounted dangerously, so I spent Saturday buried in paperwork, organizing financial records for the Thorne family's various enterprises.

Strangely, I felt safer within those heavily guarded office walls than in my own apartment. Working weekends in a mafia-protected building felt more like sanctuary than burden.

Sunday arrived with me sleeping later than usual. After ordering delivery from one of the family's affiliated restaurants, I found myself on the couch, tears streaming over a romantic film when my phone shattered the heroine's heartbreak.

"Why do you sound like you've been crying your eyes out?" Zander's voice carried that familiar concern, though I knew he'd just finished stitching up some unfortunate soul who'd crossed the wrong territory.

I sniffled, dabbing at my eyes. "Just this movie, Zander. The main character is going through hell."

His dark laugh rumbled through the speaker. "Time to put that tragedy away. Work some makeup magic and be ready soon. I'm picking you up."

"And where exactly are we going?" I asked, already reaching for the remote, knowing Zander's invitations usually involved the kind of establishments where questions weren't asked.

"Somewhere with strong drinks where we can discuss everyone else's bloody messes," he replied with his characteristic brutal honesty.

I couldn't help but laugh. "I can barely survive my own disaster. How am I supposed to handle others'?"

"That's the beauty of it," Zander quipped. "When it's someone else's bullet wound, we can judge without bleeding." He disconnected before I could respond.

Later, we were seated at a corner table in downtown's most exclusive underground tavern. The venue was impressive, vibrant atmosphere mixed with the subtle tension that came with knowing half the patrons carried concealed weapons. Live jazz floated over conversations conducted in hushed tones, and a mouthwatering spread of imported delicacies beckoned from the bar.

"You really know how to pick the dangerous spots," I said, taking in our surroundings where legitimate businessmen rubbed shoulders with made men.

Zander grinned, his medical bag discretely positioned beside his chair. "Show me someone who isn't happy with premium alcohol and the finest everything blood money can buy. They say true happiness waits at the bottom of a very expensive glass."

I burst out laughing. "You're literally a doctor who patches up gunshot wounds! You shouldn't encourage this kind of behavior."

"Darling, where would my lucrative off-books practice be without territorial disputes and family vendettas?" His eyes twinkled with dark mischief.

"That’s absolutely terrible!" I smacked his arm playfully.

"Live dangerously, regret tomorrow, Gemma. Tonight, we’re going all in."

Zander ordered a tower of imported beer and three shots of premium vodka each. We loaded our plates from the exclusive buffet, and when we returned, our drinks had materialized. Zander raised his first shot glass. "What are we toasting to?"

"In blood and bourbon, loyalty remains!" He declared, and we clinked glasses before downing the first shot. "Your turn."

I thought for a moment. "Friends who drink together, die together!" We knocked back the second shot, the liquid burning like family loyalty.

"Holy Margaret, full of grace, prepare your liver for this liquid embrace!" Zander proclaimed with the third shot, and we finished our initial round. From there, we dissolved into fits of laughter that lasted hours, the kind of release that only came when surrounded by armed protection.

Night had fallen by the time we decided to leave. Zander settled the substantial bill, and as we headed toward the heavily secured exit, my phone buzzed. The message from Dominic made my blood run cold:

"You forgot about me pretty quickly."

I scanned the tavern frantically. Was he here, watching from the shadows? I couldn’t spot him among the familiar faces of capos and soldiers. Pain quickly transformed into fury. He’d returned from his family business without contacting me, yet had that territory-climbing viper Beatrix draped all over him. Fueled by liquid courage and territorial rage, I fired back:

"Of course, only professional mourners cry over the dead!"

I shoved my phone into my purse just as Zander turned his attention back to me after signaling our armed escort. He immediately noticed my mood shift.

"What happened to your smile, beautiful?" he asked.

"That bloody fool!" I huffed.

Zander chuckled knowingly. "Oh Gemma, your love for that dangerous man knows no bounds, but your patience is practically nonexistent. Want my professional opinion?"

"No," I said flatly.

"You're both suffering needlessly because you're too stubborn to have an adult conversation about territory and loyalty," he continued, ignoring my response.

"I said I didn't want to know!"

"Since when do I listen to civilian orders?" he countered.

"Ridiculous!" I couldn't help laughing. "Don't breathe a word to my mother or your dad, okay?"

"Relax, beautiful. We're best friends forever, remember?"

"God, you're drunk. I feel sorry for whoever you have to stitch up tomorrow."

"Tomorrow I won't be drunk, I'll be hungover. Completely different medical condition requiring steadier hands," he said with practiced seriousness.

Zander's driver dropped me at my building before heading back to the medical clinic he ran for the family. When I reached my apartment door, I froze in shock. Dominic was waiting there, his expression unreadable, dressed in his signature black suit that screamed dangerous authority. He stepped forward,

took the keys from my trembling hand, unlocked the door, and pulled me inside with the controlled violence I knew too well, closing it firmly behind us.

"Let's see if you really forgot about me," he growled before crushing his lips against mine, silencing any response I might have had with the desperate hunger of a man who'd tasted blood and wanted more.

He guided me toward the bedroom, holding me against him with possessive strength, kissing me with the desperate intensity of someone who'd seen too much death and needed to feel alive. I surrendered completely, letting him lead. I had missed him with a frightening intensity, and now he was here, consuming me with the focused attention he usually reserved for family business.

Our clothing created a trail across the apartment floor like evidence of a crime. By the time we reached my bedroom, I wore nothing but my underwear. Dominic eased me onto the bed, his green eyes glittering with something that looked remarkably like raw vulnerability beneath the killer's mask.

"I was never like this before you," he whispered, his voice rough with emotion. "Never vulnerable."

He covered me with his powerful body, his mouth hot against mine. His hands traced my curves with the same precision he used to handle weapons, leaving goosebumps in their wake, my skin silently begging for more of his dangerous touch.

Without breaking our kiss, he began sliding my panties down, his mouth following the path his hands had just traveled. When he reached my breasts, he took one nipple into his mouth, sucking and teasing until I moaned beneath him like a prayer. His skilled tongue circled the sensitive peak before moving to lavish the same devoted attention on the other breast, building an almost unbearable anticipation.

Having thoroughly worshipped my breasts, he continued his downward journey, slowly removing my panties with the patience of a predator. His touches were torturously deliberate, heightening the ache between my legs. My sweet torment had only just begun.

Dominic traced a path of reverent kisses up my left leg before finally discarding my underwear completely. He carefully removed my sandal, letting it drop to the floor with finality. He retraced his path with kisses before moving to my right leg, repeating the same devoted ritual and removing my other sandal.

His lips traveled back up my body until they reclaimed my mouth, our tongues dancing as his fingers tangled in my hair with possessive need. I moaned against his lips, and he moved to my ear, gently biting the lobe before whispering, "You own me because I think about you every second of every bloody day."

I was already wet and desperate for him, but he wasn't finished with his worship. He returned to kissing my entire body, igniting every nerve ending until I was writhing beneath him like a woman possessed.

When he reached my center, he paused, his eyes dark with hunger as if preparing to taste the most precious treasure in his empire. His mouth descended, and I cried out in pleasure. "AAAHH... DOMINIC... AAANNN..."

Words abandoned me as sensation took complete control. He worked his magic with the same focused intensity he brought to family business, each movement of his tongue sending electric currents through my body. He masterfully guided me through waves of pleasure until, with his tongue inside me and his thumb circling that sensitive bundle of nerves, I surrendered to an overwhelming climax that shattered me completely.

He climbed back up my body, his lips never leaving my skin, as if determined to mark every inch of me as his territory. When he reached my ear again, he whispered, "You have me, Gemma, making excuses to see you, praying it's not too late for redemption."

Before I could respond, he covered my mouth with another kiss, this one different, not desperate or fierce, but deeply intimate and full of the tenderness he showed no one else, as if conveying that he loved and missed me beyond reason. I returned his kiss with equal fervor, pouring into it all the longing that had been consuming my soul.

As we kissed with reverent intensity, he positioned himself and began entering me, gentle and careful, melting into me with complete devotion. His movements felt like an enchantment that separated me from myself and made me completely his, without reservations or conditions.

I surrendered completely to this perfect dangerous love, moving together as one until we reached the pinnacle of pleasure simultaneously. I gave myself to him as he did to me, two souls bound by something stronger than blood oaths.

After such an intense and powerful release, I felt transcendent. We remained connected, wordless, entangled for what seemed like hours, our breathing and heartbeats gradually returning to normal. Held in his arms, I drifted to sleep feeling secure and protected by the most dangerous man in the city.

But the next morning, I woke up cold and alone, abandonment gnawing at my soul like a physical wound. I dragged myself from bed in tears, washing away the night under a scalding shower. As I prepared for another day at the family's front operation, I began to wonder if that night of passionate love had been nothing but an alcohol-induced fantasy. By the time I finished getting ready, I had convinced myself it had all been just a dangerous dream.

Chapter 304: Spiral Into Darkness

Dominic's POV

Several days had passed since that night with Gemma—the night I surrendered my heavily guarded heart to her completely. In her arms, I discovered a sanctuary I never knew existed in my blood-soaked world. For those precious hours, I believed she had given herself to me with the same desperate totality. Then my encrypted phone shattered our perfect moment with its urgent buzz, and I had to vanish into the darkness of family duty.

Marcus's capture by our family operatives demanded my immediate presence. As the Capo responsible for our financial networks, I needed to coordinate the media blackout and ensure no loose threads remained. Our contacts within law enforcement successfully buried the arrest records, and our legal team kept the entire operation sealed from prying eyes. Yet that treacherous snake managed to secure representation from one of the city's most expensive attorneys—no doubt funded by our enemies—and walked free within hours. The thought of him breathing the same air as decent people made my blood run cold with rage.

I had left a note for Gemma at my secured apartment—a desperate plea wrapped in vulnerability I'd never shown another soul. Her silence cut deeper than any blade ever could. Now, agony consumed every fiber of my being, the physical pain intertwining with emotional devastation until I couldn't distinguish between them. Fury at Marcus's betrayal, frustration at my own failures, and crushing regret for ever trusting that poisonous bastard churned in my chest like acid. The pressure sometimes grew so intense I wondered if this was how men died of broken hearts. Losing her had shattered something essential in my core.

Desperate for the brotherhood that had always been my anchor, I arranged lunch with Caleb and the others. I hadn't seen my blood brothers since our emergency meeting with our family's legal team at

Caleb’s fortress-like office. We met at an upscale restaurant in neutral territory, and their familiar faces provided momentary relief from the darkness consuming me. As we prepared to leave, movement in my peripheral vision froze me to the spot.

There sat Gemma, luminous and smiling, with the same civilian I’d noticed lurking outside her building during my surveillance sweeps. For one devastating second, our gazes locked across the crowded dining room. I could only shake my head in bitter disbelief. After everything we’d shared—after she’d been completely mine that night, body and soul—she was entertaining another man. Was this some twisted game? A calculated move to wound me? Or did she simply take pleasure in watching a Capo crumble? I forced myself to turn away and stride toward the exit.

"Dominic, you look like hell," Xavier’s concerned voice followed me into the street.

"Nothing’s right anymore, Xavier," Caleb answered before I could respond. "I recognize that look. You want my advice?"

"Absolutely not," I said flatly.

"I’m giving it anyway. No matter how much this tears you apart, don’t abandon her. Crawl if you have to, beg, humble yourself before her, but never surrender," Caleb commanded with the authority of a Don. "If you give up on her, you’ll never survive the aftermath. Trust me—I’ve walked through that particular hell."

"Your situation with Ivy," I acknowledged with a heavy sigh.

"Exactly. I endured months of torment and near-madness fighting for my wife. But every moment of suffering was worth it," Caleb’s expression held the hard-won wisdom of a man who’d conquered his demons.

"Want me to run a background check on the guy?" Jude offered, his surveillance instincts kicking in.

"No. I’ve seen enough," I replied curtly.

After parting ways with my brothers, I returned to the anonymous luxury hotel that had become my sanctuary. I couldn't stomach returning to my penthouse apartment where her scent still lingered, or the family compound house where servants would witness my downfall. I drank myself into oblivion alone in that sterile room, surrounded by the ghosts of my failures.

The following morning, I dragged myself to Zenith Systems headquarters, struggling to maintain the facade of the ruthless Capo everyone expected. Zoe observed me with sharp eyes but maintained her professional distance. I was attempting to focus on laundering reports when my mother's call interrupted.

"Dominic, how are you holding up?"

"Managing, Mom." I tried to inject some strength into my voice.

"'Managing' isn't an answer for a mother who's worried sick. Where were you yesterday?" Her maternal radar had always been impossibly accurate.

"Around the city, Mom."

"'Around the city' tells me nothing. I need real answers."

"I was handling family business."

"No, you weren't. You didn't answer your secured line, weren't at the office, weren't at the penthouse, and haven't been seen at the compound house in weeks. In fact, my sources tell me you've been completely absent from both properties."

"Mom, I'm staying at the hotel." I surrendered to her relentless maternal investigation.

"Why a hotel when you have perfectly secure residences?"

"Because I can’t bear to enter places that remind me of what I’ve lost, and I can’t face the family seeing me like this."

"Then come home to me. You don’t need to hide in some impersonal hotel room, son."

"Mom, I need isolation right now. Please don’t take it personally."

"Dominic, let me help you through this," she pleaded with the desperation only a mother could feel.

"The best way you can help is by giving me space to process this, and the hotel provides the anonymity I require right now."

"Fine. I’ll respect that decision. But I need to know exactly where you’re staying, so I can find you if necessary."

"Understood, Mom. I’ll send you the details through secure channels."

When I terminated the call, I caught Zoe studying me with undisguised concern. Yet she maintained her professional silence, simply settling into her chair so we could begin the day’s criminal enterprises.

Days bled into weeks, and weeks dissolved into months. Several months had passed since that final night with Gemma when I’d believed we had a future together. My descent into darkness accelerated with each sunrise. Occasionally, I’d encounter Gemma during family gatherings at Caleb’s compound, but she’d invariably disappear the moment I arrived. My existence had contracted to mechanically executing my Capo duties during daylight hours, then retreating to my hotel to drink away the memories.

I began appearing at headquarters looking increasingly unstable—arriving late, reeking of expensive whiskey, hollow-eyed like a man already dead. I delegated all client meetings to Zoe, limiting my participation to signing whatever documents she placed before me. Her continued silence struck me as uncharacteristic; she merely watched me with calculating eyes, speaking only about operational necessities. My life had become a barren wasteland, each day more desolate than the last.

Chapter 305: Hidden Letter Found

Gemma's POV

Each day drags by like a slow execution. After that night when Dominic appeared in my apartment like a shadow from my darkest dreams, something inside me shattered completely. Then seeing his face twisted with disgust at that restaurant days later—it was like watching my soul bleed out in real time. I never knew emotional suffering could feel this much like dying.

Ivy's pregnancy reached its final stage, with everyone in the Thorne family buzzing about the quadruplets who would strengthen the bloodline. I had no right to burden the Don's wife with my problems while she carried the future of the organization. My visits to the family compound became brief and strategic—see her, avoid lingering conversations with the other women in the circle, deflect questions about my mental state, leave before Vincenzo or any of the other soldiers could corner me with their concerned interrogation. I've become a master at dodging phone calls from the family network too.

Zander has become my lifeline through this hell. Over these months, he's transformed from a fellow survivor of the streets into my most trusted confidant. We share a mutual understanding of what it feels like to be abandoned by the people who were supposed to protect us. Our evenings often consist of trading war stories and fresh wounds, though he consistently argues I'm being stubborn about reaching out to Dominic. I always counter that a Capo like Dominic has undoubtedly replaced me with someone more suitable for his position already.

Nick's threatening letters still occasionally found their way to my old address despite his imprisonment. I finally visited the post office and arranged for them to note my relocation without disclosing my new location to anyone who might come looking. The letters stopped coming for a while, offering small relief while Daniel and Adler continued their investigation into his prison connections.

Another unexpected blessing was Marcus's disappearance from my life. He hasn't shown up to terrorize me in months, and I'm grateful for that reprieve. Perhaps even a disgraced former mafioso grows tired of tormenting someone so far beneath his notice.

I notice the looks Xavier, Jude, Caleb, Finn, and Daniel give me whenever we cross paths at family gatherings—like they're harboring dangerous secrets they lack the courage to share. I pretend not to notice, assuming they want to tell me Dominic's found a new woman, probably someone from a proper crime family. It would make sense; a man in Dominic's position would never remain alone for long.

Recently there has been absolute chaos within the Thorne organization. Ivy delivered her babies, and one was nearly kidnapped from the hospital by rival family operatives. Roman, a traitor within our own ranks, broke into the Thorne compound and injured Caleb during a failed assassination attempt, though thankfully that snake was captured alive, and Caleb is recovering under heavy guard. It seemed Ivy and Caleb might finally find peace in their empire—until Ivy called requesting a private conversation, which struck me as unusual given the heightened security protocols.

"Where are those beautiful future soldiers?" I announced as I entered the heavily fortified nursery, making a fuss over the quadruplets arranged in bulletproof strollers throughout the armored living room.

"Just back from a supervised garden walk with the security detail," Ivy replied, embracing me carefully. "How are you surviving, my friend?"

"I'm managing, Ivy. And you?"

"Worried about you. I know I've been distant with the bed rest and heightened security measures, but now that the immediate threats are neutralized, I won't rest until you tell me everything." She guided me toward the reinforced couch.

"There's nothing to tell, Ivy," I insisted, forcing calm into my voice despite knowing she could read people like classified intelligence reports.

"Gemma, can I share something with you?" Her tone turned gentle but firm.

"Ivy, if it's about Dominic, please don't. Let's leave that bloody Chapter buried where it belongs."

"But, Gemma..." I silenced her with a pleading look that held all my desperation.

"Thank you for understanding." My eyes welled with unwelcome moisture that threatened to expose my carefully maintained facade.

"But you'll be my daughter's godmother, right? Or are you planning to disappear from our family completely?" Ivy pouted playfully, though I could hear the underlying concern of someone who'd lost too many people to this life.

I laughed despite myself. "Of course I'll be little Olive's godmother!" I tickled the beautiful blue-eyed baby who would someday inherit part of this empire. "I'd be honored to help raise the next generation."

"You should know Dominic's designated as her godfather." Ivy finally revealed the source of her worry.

"That's not a problem. I can handle being in the same room as him for family obligations. I'll attend the baptism ceremony and be there for everything Olive needs from her godmother. I won't let personal history interfere with family loyalty," I assured her with more confidence than I felt.

"But seeing him will reopen wounds," Ivy sighed knowingly.

"The pain will fade eventually." I squeezed her hand gently, hoping I sounded more convincing than I felt.

I created elaborate excuses to leave before the usual gathering time when everyone arrives to see the babies and conduct family business. I'd strategically visit earlier, during lunch hours, or when cornered by circumstances, I'd make hasty exits claiming urgent errands.

Today, however, fate had other plans. As I was leaving through the compound's main entrance, Dominic arrived in his black luxury sedan. Our eyes locked in a moment of painful recognition that cut through me like a knife, but neither of us spoke. He looked uncharacteristically disheveled—no suit jacket or tie, wrinkled dress shirt, messy hair, stubbled face that spoke of sleepless nights. This careless appearance seemed completely wrong for the typically immaculate Capo. Perhaps he'd just left some new woman's bed after a long night of forgetting I ever existed. My chest constricted painfully as I turned away, passing him without acknowledgment like we were strangers.

Back in my modest apartment, I surveyed the chaos that had become my living space—as disheveled and broken as Dominic had appeared. I smiled bitterly; my surroundings perfectly reflected the wreckage of my mental state. I called Zander and invited him over for pizza, desperately needing to vent to someone who understood survival.

"Jesus Christ, Gemma!" Zander exclaimed, scanning my apartment in genuine shock. "What the hell happened here? Did someone ransack the place?"

"This is exactly how I feel inside, Zander," I lamented pathetically from my position buried under blankets on the couch.

"Enough, Gemma! This self-destruction has gone too far. Look at this disaster!" Zander disappeared into the kitchen, returning with cleaning supplies like a man on a mission. "Get off that couch. We're cleaning this place top to bottom."

"I don't want to!" I whined like a child. "I invited you for pizza and complaining, not manual labor."

"And we'll have pizza—after we restore some order to your life." When I didn't move, Zander sat beside me with the patience of someone who'd been through his own version of hell. "Sweetie, cleaning your environment will help organize your thoughts too. You'll see things more clearly when you're not surrounded by chaos."

"You promise that will actually work?" I asked, feeling defeated and desperate for any small improvement.

"I promise. I've been through this exact phase myself after my own world imploded."

We spent several hours systematically restoring order to my life, one salvaged possession at a time. As we finished, I genuinely felt better than I had in weeks.

"Now let's throw these clothes in the washer," Zander said, dragging me toward the laundry area. "I'll order pizza while you handle that domestic responsibility."

"You're always right, Zander. I actually do feel more human."

"Of course I am. I'm the best friend you've got!" he proclaimed with mock arrogance, making us both laugh for the first time in forever.

While sorting through the clothes that had been scattered across my bedroom floor, a piece of paper fell from the folds of a scarf. Zander retrieved it and handed it to me without looking.

"What's this?" I smiled, taking the paper. As I read the handwriting, my legs went weak and tears began streaming down my face uncontrollably.

It was a note from Dominic dated from that night I thought was just a vivid dream. He had actually been there, in my apartment, while I slept. I trembled violently, barely able to read through my tears as the implications hit me. Zander guided me to a kitchen stool, handed me water, and took the paper to read it himself.

"Let's see what kind of message could cause this reaction," Zander said, beginning to read aloud:

"Gemma, I'm consumed by longing and bound by our love that burns deeper than any oath I've ever sworn to this family. This love destroys me, blazes through my veins, suffocates me with its intensity, yet makes me feel truly alive—because I live for you alone, my precious nightingale. Don't fear jumping into this abyss of dangerous feelings with me. I had a family emergency that demanded my immediate attention and had to leave, but believe me when I say I would have given anything to spend the entire night holding you and wake with you safe in my arms. Forget everything that stands between us and come back to me. I'll wait for your call no matter how long it takes. I'll always belong to you completely, Dominic."

"Damn, this man knows how to write a letter that could melt steel," Zander remarked with genuine admiration.

"Zander, where exactly was this hidden?" I asked desperately, my hands shaking as I held this proof that everything I thought I knew might be wrong.

"It was tangled up in your clothes—most of what I gathered came from beside your bed. What was it caught on?"

"That colorful scarf I never wear."

"The navy blue one? It was crumpled by your bedside table in the corner. The note probably fell when you moved around and with the state this apartment was in..." Zander smiled knowingly. "You need to call him, Gemma. Even I’m impressed by this guy after reading that."

"Zander, that was some time ago! The night we went to that underground bar," I explained, my voice breaking.

"The night you claimed you ’dreamed’ about him?"

"Exactly."

"So it wasn’t a dream?" Zander looked genuinely astonished. "Introduce me to this man. I need to learn how to leave a woman the way he left you."

"Crying and broken?" I mocked bitterly.

"Completely in love and desperate to get back to him, you fool," Zander laughed. "Call him right now."

"I can’t. A man like Dominic doesn’t wait for so long for anyone. He’s forgotten me by now."

"I seriously doubt that! A woman like you isn’t easily forgotten, especially by someone who writes letters like this." Zander squeezed my shoulder with firm encouragement. "This isn’t the kind of thing a man writes unless you’ve gotten under his skin permanently."

"Do you really think I still have a chance after all this time?" I asked, staring at the floor as hope and terror warred in my chest.

"A man who writes like that will never forget you. He’s probably been waiting by his phone constantly." Zander held out my phone, his eyes full of conviction and encouragement. "Call him—you control your own destiny now. Make your own chance!"

Chapter 306: Hospital Revelation

Gemma’s POV

With trembling fingers, I scrolled through my contacts until Dominic’s name appeared on the screen. Drawing in a shaky breath, I pressed call, only to be instantly redirected to voicemail. My heart plummeted. I glanced at Zander, who offered a sympathetic grimace.

"Food’s here. I’ll handle the delivery while you get yourself together," Zander declared with unwavering resolve. "You can eat while getting dressed, then I’ll drive you to the Capo’s place." His confidence far exceeded my own.

"What if he’s conducting family business with someone?" I whispered, my stomach churning with dread and possessiveness.

Zander scoffed. "Then you walk straight in, dismiss whoever it is, and reclaim your territory. Trust me, he’ll respect the boldness." Despite everything, his blunt reasoning made me laugh.

True to his promise, Zander managed the food while I rushed to make myself presentable. Between bites of perfectly prepared Italian cuisine, I applied makeup and selected an outfit that balanced professionalism with subtle allure. Clutching my purse with white knuckles, we set out into the night.

When we arrived at Dominic’s heavily fortified estate, I asked Zander to remain in the vehicle in case the situation deteriorated. The armed security guard’s response hit me like a physical blow: the Capo hadn’t been at the compound for quite some time. My thoughts spiraled. Perhaps his downtown penthouse?

Zander navigated through the city to Dominic’s high-rise sanctuary. The building’s concierge delivered identical news – Dominic hadn’t been seen at the penthouse for quite some time either. Where had he vanished to? Zoe would have answers.

I dialed her secure line, anxiety mounting with each electronic tone.

"Well, well. Look who finally remembered I exist," Zoe’s sardonic voice crackled through the encrypted connection.

"I’m not that neglectful," I countered with a weak smile.

"No? Miss Vanishing Act has the nerve to claim she’s not ungrateful?" she needled.

"You know I care about all of you," I replied, though she couldn’t witness my pout.

"I know, beautiful. What’s the emergency?" Her tone shifted to concern.

"I’m in serious trouble, Zoe. Do you know Dominic’s current location?" I asked desperately.

"Finally!" Zoe exclaimed as though she’d been anticipating this conversation for ages. "Have you checked the compound?"

"Both the estate and the penthouse. According to security, he hasn’t been at either location for quite some time."

"I heard whispers, but I don’t have specifics on his whereabouts. Have you tried his encrypted line?" Zoe inquired.

"That was my first attempt. It’s completely dead."

"Christ, don’t tell me Frost lost another secure phone," she groaned.

"Another one?" I questioned.

"Yeah, a while back, before that business trip, he misplaced his device. Still hunting for the damn thing," Zoe chuckled grimly. "Gemma, it’s late. He might be at Bee’s safe house or Nadia’s place. Why don’t you come to my apartment? We can strategize, you can crash here, and tomorrow we’ll locate your Capo."

"I don’t know if he’s still mine, Zoe," I sighed heavily. "I squandered so much time."

"Yeah, you did. No sugarcoating that truth. But come over regardless."

"Thanks, but Zander will escort me home. Just contact me if you hear from Dominic tomorrow?"

"Who's Zander?" Zoe's question came sharp and fast.

"Ryder's son. He's like family to me. I'll introduce him properly soon," I explained. "But you'll reach out about Dominic, right?"

"Count on it, Gemma. Get some rest and look devastating tomorrow," Zoe replied with dark humor.

After ending the call, Zander drove me back to my apartment. Once alone, the night stretched interminably ahead. Anxiety, fear, and desperate longing created a perfect storm of restlessness that made sleep impossible.

The following day, I forced myself through my morning routine and arrived at the legitimate front office, compulsively checking my phone for updates from Zoe. Hours passed in silence, the lack of communication becoming increasingly ominous. Mid-afternoon, my concentration shattered when an unexpected visitor appeared – my mother. She had never before visited my workplace, making her sudden appearance deeply unsettling.

"Willow! What a surprise!" I embraced her warmly.

"If I were you, I'd wipe that smile away immediately. I'm not here for pleasantries," she stated coldly, her expression granite-hard.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Alarm coursed through me.

"Is there somewhere private we can speak?" she asked, her demeanor radiating barely contained fury.

I guided her to the secure conference room, poured two cups of coffee, and settled at the polished table. "What's happening?"

"Gemma, why did you allow Dominic to believe Zander is your boyfriend?" The directness of her accusation stunned me.

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw Dominic today. At the hospital," she revealed.

"Hospital? Is he injured?" Terror seized me.

"Physically, he'll survive. Emotionally, he's destroyed. They found him unconscious in a downtown hotel after he drank himself into a coma. And do you know why he's drowning himself in alcohol, Gemma? Because he believes you've moved on with Zander."

My mother's concern was evident, but surprisingly, it wasn't directed at me.

"Mom, I never told anyone Zander was my boyfriend. Dominic only saw us together once, from across the street."

"Sweetheart," her tone softened dramatically, "what's really happening here? I watch you suffer over him, and today I witnessed him suffering over you. It's obvious how deeply you care for each other, yet you remain apart. According to Zander, it's all because of your stubborn pride."

"Zander and his big mouth," I muttered.

"Gemma, what did I teach you about pride?" My mother's penetrating stare demanded honesty.

"Mom..." I attempted to deflect, but there was no escaping Willow's brutal truths.

"You’re allowing foolish pride to transform your life into nothing but agony. It’ll make you bitter and vindictive! You’re blind and deaf because of pride that’s punishing both of you. I hate watching you hurt, but you’re choosing this suffering. End it immediately." Her words unleashed my tears.

"You’re right, Mom. I’ll make this right," I promised as she pulled me close.

"Learn from this mistake. Don’t let pride damage you again. Unless you secretly enjoy the pain." She rubbed my back soothingly as I collapsed into her embrace.

After my mother departed, I dried my tears, more determined than ever to reclaim Dominic’s heart. Zoe’s continued silence was baffling. I messaged her only to receive a cryptic reply requesting patience. But patience had abandoned me long ago. It was time to seek assistance from someone who would definitely help me in my mission.

Chapter 307: Rock Bottom Rising

Dominic’s POV

Last night, I drank myself into oblivion after another failed attempt to see Gemma. My plan had been straightforward: visit Caleb’s compound to see the babies and hopefully catch a glimpse of her. But fate, it seemed, had other plans. When I arrived at the heavily fortified estate, Gemma was already leaving through the side gate, slipping away in her sedan before I could even approach. I watched helplessly from behind the bulletproof windows of my armored vehicle as she drove off, leaving me standing there like a broken man, my heart shattering all over again. I couldn’t bring myself to enter the compound after that. The thought of facing Caleb’s knowing looks or the family’s protective glares was unbearable. Instead, I ordered my driver to take me back to the safe house hotel.

Once in my secured room, I followed my recent nightly ritual—drowning my sorrows in expensive whiskey. Not just a glass or two to dull the pain of losing my territory’s queen, but glass after glass until the bottle became my only companion. I drank until consciousness abandoned me completely, until the weight of being a Capo who couldn’t protect what mattered most finally crushed me.

When I came to, I found myself in an unfamiliar sterile room. Confusion swept over me as I took in the medical equipment surrounding me. IV lines connected to bags hanging beside the hospital bed told me everything I needed to know about my current predicament. Somehow, the feared Capo of the family had landed himself in a civilian hospital. But how? The last thing I remembered was being locked in my hotel room, clutching that whiskey bottle like it was my lifeline to sanity.

My entire body ached, my head pounding with the intensity of a sledgehammer. The irony wasn't lost on me—I'd survived countless turf wars, assassination attempts, and family power struggles, only to be laid low by my own demons. I lay there staring at the sterile white ceiling, listening to the muffled sounds of hospital activity, knowing that someone would eventually come check on the infamous Dominic Frost.

Then I heard a voice that made my blood run cold with shame.

"Dominic? Darling, what happened to you?" I opened my eyes to see Willow Valance, Gemma's mother, standing beside my bed. The woman who had once welcomed me into her modest home, who had treated a dangerous Capo like he was worthy of her daughter's love.

"Willow! How are you?" I managed to greet her, my voice hoarse and my mind still foggy from the alcohol poisoning.

"I'm fine, darling. But look at you! What happened?" Her maternal concern made my chest tighten with guilt.

"I'm finished, Willow. I lost your daughter forever. I was a complete fool!" The raw confession poured out of me without restraint, past caring about maintaining the cold facade expected of a family lieutenant.

"Of course not, son. Gemma loves you deeply. You two will work things out," she assured me, but her words felt like salt in an open wound.

"No, Willow, she's already moved on from me. I saw her with that doctor. She replaced me with him—she's seeing him now." I was dangerously close to tears, past caring about how pathetic the mighty Capo looked reduced to this state.

"Professor? What doctor? I don't know anything about this," Willow said, genuinely puzzled by my accusation.

"That one, right there!" I awkwardly pointed to the medical professional entering my private room. Just my luck—being treated by my ex-girlfriend's new lover. The universe was truly piling on the punishment for a man who had blood on his hands but couldn't keep the one pure thing in his life.

"Willow!" The doctor smiled warmly and embraced her like family. "What a pleasure to see you here! Don't tell me you're accompanying my patient?"

"No, I just have consultations with some specialists here today. Are you treating him, Zander?" Willow asked with an expression that seemed almost amused, as if she was enjoying watching me spiral.

"Actually, I just started my shift, arrived a bit late today. So, how do you know my patient?" the doctor asked with professional curiosity.

"Oh, Zander, this is Dominic Frost, Gemma's boyfriend. I saw him here and came to say hello and check on his condition," Willow explained matter-of-factly.

I looked at Willow suspiciously. Did she just call me Gemma's boyfriend to this doctor's face? Was she deliberately provoking Zander? Yet Gemma clearly had feelings for the medical professional. Why would Willow make such a bold statement unless there was something I was missing? The doctor's eyes widened in recognition, followed by a genuinely amused smile.

"Ah, so you're the tech mogul!" he commented playfully, as if this revelation explained everything.

"Tech mogul?" I repeated, finding myself oddly pleased by the civilian nickname that masked my true role as money laundering operations chief.

"Yeah, Gemma mentioned you run some kind of technology enterprise, so I tease her by calling you the tech mogul." He continued smiling, and my confusion only deepened.

"Dominic, Zander is Ryder's son," Willow clarified, referring to her longtime friend. "He and Gemma are like siblings who found each other later in life."

I felt as though a massive weight had been lifted from my chest. The kind of relief that came from learning your territory wasn’t under threat after all. "Like siblings?" I asked, needing absolute confirmation.

"Yes," they answered in unison, both looking at me like I was an idiot for not understanding this basic fact.

"You mean you’re not her new boyfriend?" I asked directly, abandoning all pretense of dignity.

The doctor burst into genuine laughter. "No, man, we’re friends. We joke that we’re siblings from different parents who met as adults." His smile was friendly and sincere, without any of the territorial challenge I would expect from a romantic rival.

"Boys, I have to go. Zander, take good care of him. Dominic, come visit us at home when you’re better." Willow said her goodbyes and departed, leaving me alone with my supposed rival.

"So, that was quite a drinking binge you went on, huh?" Zander teased without malice.

"Don’t even mention it," I said, managing a small smile for the first time in weeks. "So you two never had anything romantic? Not even interest?"

"Relax, Dominic. Gemma is an amazing woman, but she’s like a sister to me." He checked my IV and vital signs with professional efficiency. "Was this bender about her?"

"Definitely! I was desperate, not knowing how to win her back from you—who seemed like some kind of perfect gentleman who makes her smile the way I used to."

"Whoa, look at that jealousy!" He laughed. "But I’m not perfect, man. You actually saw me with her?"

"Yeah, once. She was smiling and relaxed with you. She feels safe around you," I admitted, recalling the restaurant scene that had tortured me for days. "And my nephew told me you’re practically perfect."

"Oh yeah, I met Vincenzo. Great kid! Very protective of his uncle."

"Vincenzo is quite a character, that’s for sure."

Zander hesitated before speaking, as if weighing his words carefully. "Look, I probably shouldn’t get involved, but we’ve got to help each other out here, so I’m going to tell you something important."

"What is it?" My full attention was on him now.

"Stop drinking and go after Gemma! That woman is suffering without you. Don’t lose her, because she’s incredible. And you two are apart purely because of stubborn pride."

Hope flickered in my chest like a flame I thought had been extinguished. "Do you really think she’ll come back to me?"

"I’m absolutely certain of it! But you need to fight for her."

"I’ll follow your advice as soon as I recover from whatever this is. By the way, how did I end up here?" I asked, genuinely curious about my rock bottom moment.

"Let me check your file." He consulted his tablet. "You arrived by ambulance with hotel security. According to the report, housekeeping found you unconscious on your room floor, and management thought it best to bring you in for evaluation."

"This is rock bottom!" I lamented, thinking about how far the mighty had fallen.

"That’s actually good!" Zander replied with conviction.

"Good?" I thought I’d misheard him.

"Great, actually," he corrected himself with a grin. "If you've hit rock bottom, that means now you can start climbing back up."

I looked at him, unable to argue with his logic. He was absolutely right, and his advice was exactly what I needed to hear. I was beginning to genuinely like this guy who could have been my rival.

"Damn!" I muttered under my breath.

"What is it?" he asked, confused by my sudden outburst.

"You really are perfect!" I said, and his smile widened with genuine warmth.

After discharging me with strict instructions about alcohol consumption, Zander repeated his advice about seeking out Gemma and resolving our issues like adults. I promised him I would take his words to heart. Since it was already late afternoon, I headed straight to the office, though my mind was far from the legitimate business operations that served as our family's front.

Zoe tried explaining what had happened at several important meetings she'd covered in my absence the day before, but I couldn't focus on territory disputes or money laundering protocols. Then, she transformed into the commanding lieutenant I remembered from months ago—before Gemma had turned my dangerous world upside down and made me human.

After snapping me back to reality with her characteristic sharp tongue, Zoe led me out of the office with a promise that made my heart race with something I hadn't felt in months: she would help me win back the woman I loved, using every resource the family had at their disposal.

Chapter 308: Preparing for Battle

Dominic's POV

Zoe and I grabbed espresso at the small Italian cafe near the Thorne family's front operation building. While there, she administered what she called a "gentle reminder" by yanking my ear hard enough to make me wince - a move that would have cost anyone else their life, but Zoe had earned her immunity through years of unwavering loyalty.

She then outlined her master plan: shopping expedition, complete makeover, return to my Capo duties soon, and finally, the part that mattered most - helping me win back Gemma. I wasn't entirely clear on what all this entailed, but I was already drowning in misery since losing the woman who had become my entire world, so I figured I might as well accept the lifeline my most trusted lieutenant was throwing me.

After finishing our coffee, we commandeered one of the family's armored vehicles and headed directly to the luxury hotel where I'd been living like a wounded animal for some time, avoiding my responsibilities and drowning in self-destructive rage.

"Dominic Frost," Zoe announced once we entered my penthouse suite, "you're taking a proper shower, packing your belongings, and checking out of this hotel immediately."

I ran my hand through my disheveled hair, noting how the once-pristine suite now reeked of whiskey and despair. "Zoe, I can't go back to the family compound without Gemma there. And if I return to my private apartment, she'll never forgive me for what happened there."

"I see I need to rearrange my strategy." Zoe sighed dramatically, her voice carrying the authority of someone who had cleaned up after my violent outbursts for years. "Fine. We'll tackle the Gemma situation today, and soon you can return to running your territory."

My face lit up with the first genuine hope I'd felt in a long time. "Are you serious?"

"But," she raised a finger like the seasoned enforcer she was, "you follow my instructions exactly. Starting with that shower because, frankly, you smell like you've been sleeping in the back alleys of our worst neighborhoods." She physically pushed me toward the bathroom with surprising strength.

"Whatever you say," I agreed, discreetly sniffing my shirt. The grimace that followed made Zoe burst into laughter. "Oh, wait a moment." I hurried back to the reception desk, gave some instructions to the manager, and rejoined Zoe at the elevator.

"What was that about?" she asked, her trained suspicious nature evident in her voice.

"I asked them to send up the housekeeper who helped me earlier. I want to thank her properly."

"Helped you how?"

"She found me unconscious on the floor, completely intoxicated after that disaster with Beatrix, and called for assistance. The manager arranged for an ambulance to take me to the hospital before word could spread through the families."

"Hospital?" Zoe's eyes widened in genuine shock. "Dominic, you're not some street-level soldier who can't handle his liquor. You're a respected Capo!"

"Everything just became unbearable without Gemma," I admitted quietly, my voice carrying the weight of a man who had killed for lesser reasons but couldn't function without one woman's love.

"Don't ever do something that reckless again," she admonished before softening slightly. "Though I have to say, your generosity toward civilians is quite admirable for someone in our line of work."

"It's not generosity, Zoe. It's gratitude. She could have easily ignored me and walked away, but she didn't. She cared enough to help someone she didn't know was dangerous - and that led to something even more significant."

"What do you mean?" she asked as we exited the elevator on my floor.

"I was treated by Dr. Zander at the hospital."

"Who's that?"

"Willow's boyfriend Ryder's son. He's like a brother to Gemma, but I only discovered that today. For a while I've been torturing myself thinking he was Gemma's new lover, ready to eliminate him from the equation."

"Oh right, she mentioned him yesterday," Zoe said, accepting the bottled water I handed her from the suite's bar.

"What do you mean you didn’t know about him?"

"Dominic, our girl has been isolating herself, barely communicating with any of us in the organization. Just like you did with your crew," Zoe reprimanded. "That hurts, you know? We’re family."

"We won’t do that anymore," I promised with a genuine smile, meaning every word.

The elderly housekeeper arrived shortly after. She was humble and kind-hearted, with gentle mannerisms and a warm smile - the kind of innocent civilian our world was supposed to protect. When I asked for her banking details to send her a thank-you payment, she adamantly refused. I handed her my business card instead, insisting she contact me if she ever needed anything - including protection. After she left, however, I called the manager and obtained her information anyway, transferring a generous sum to her account as appreciation for her assistance.

"Shower time, Frost." Zoe pinched her nose dramatically and pointed to the bathroom like a drill sergeant.

Before walking away, I turned to her with the sincerity reserved for blood family. "I missed bossy, controlling Zoe. Don’t ever disappear again." Her face brightened with a huge smile that reminded me why she was irreplaceable in this brutal world.

When I emerged from the bathroom in a hotel robe, I found that Zoe had organized all my belongings with military precision and laid out casual clothes for me to wear. I took them back to the bathroom to change, noting how she’d selected everything to make me look approachable rather than threatening.

After loading my luggage into the armored SUV, I asked, "Where to now?"

"First, hand over those keys because I’m driving." She extended her palm expectantly, and I surrendered the keys without protest - a gesture of trust I’d never show another soul.

Zoe drove us to a secluded location outside the city - a luxurious country retreat that served as an upscale spa, the kind of place where wealthy criminals could relax without fear of surveillance or rival families. I looked around in amazement at the heavily secured surroundings.

"How did you find this place?" I asked, genuinely impressed. "The family women usually frequent that other spa downtown."

"Used to, darling. I've already introduced them to this sanctuary. We're going to spend the next few hours being pampered, massaged, and rejuvenated." Zoe's excitement was infectious.

The spa experience was comprehensive - professional haircut, straight razor shave, manicure, facial treatment. We enjoyed lunch there, surrounded by tranquility I hadn't experienced since before this war with my own heart began. Then came the specialized treatments: deep tissue massage, mud therapy, mineral soaks, and meditation sessions. By the end, my body felt so relaxed I could hardly remember what constant tension felt like.

"This place is incredible, Zoe. I definitely need to bring the crew here," I said as we were leaving.

"I know my business, Frost!" she replied confidently. "You should bring Gemma next time. They have amazing couples' packages and private accommodations that even rival families couldn't breach."

"Excellent idea. Have you been here with Finn?"

Zoe nodded with an uncharacteristically dreamy expression that told me her own heart had found its target.

"Now let's hit the stores. We need a few things." Zoe was clearly operating on a mission, and nothing would deter her from success.

After our shopping expedition, we headed to my private residence. Earlier, Zoe had instructed my security staff to thoroughly clean and organize everything, informing them I was returning and they could take the weekend off. When we arrived, the house was immaculate, with a fully stocked kitchen and fresh flowers throughout.

"Let's start upstairs in the bedroom," Zoe directed.

"Fine," I said, following her up the staircase. "Still can’t believe you wouldn’t let me buy even one rose."

"Stop complaining, Dominic! This needs to be completely different from every other time you’ve tried to buy someone’s forgiveness."

I surrendered with a sigh. I had agreed to follow her lead, and her strategy made sense, even if it wasn’t my usual approach of overwhelming force. It took considerable time, but when we finally completed all our preparations, Zoe and I surveyed the transformed space with satisfaction. She raised her hand for a high-five, which I enthusiastically returned, celebrating our tactical success.

"Now, Dominic," Zoe said, walking toward the reinforced door, "make yourself presentable while I go collect our queen. Try to stay calm and don’t do anything that might require cleanup."

"Not sure that’s possible," I replied honestly, my killer instincts warring with desperate hope. "Don’t take too long."

She left with a knowing laugh, and I stood in the middle of my transformed fortress, heart pounding with anticipation that felt more dangerous than any territorial war I’d ever fought.

Chapter 309: The Hunt Begins

Gemma’s POV

After receiving Zoe’s encrypted message, I was done waiting in the shadows. I rushed back to my apartment for a scalding shower, applied war paint with meticulous precision, spritzed my signature perfume, and slipped into the black dress I’d been saving for a special occasion. My stilettos clicked like gunshots across the hardwood as I prepared myself for battle. Today, I was reclaiming my place at Dominic’s side, regardless of which safe house he’d retreated to.

My first call went to my most trusted ally within the Thorne organization.

"Aunt Gemma, beautiful as always! How’s life in the family treating you?" Vincenzo answered with characteristic warmth, though I detected the underlying tension that came with our world.

"I’m losing my mind and need backup," I replied without preamble. His tone shifted immediately to the clipped professionalism of a made man. "What’s the situation?"

"I need to locate your uncle. He’s gone completely dark – hasn’t been to any of his usual locations in ages," I explained, my words tumbling out in a rush.

"Hold the line, Aunt Gemma." I heard Vincenzo step away, likely conferring with his security detail before returning. "Nonna thinks he might be holed up at her penthouse. What’s your current location?"

"Home base."

"Get ready for extraction. I’ll bring a car and we’ll hit Nonna’s place together."

"I’m already dressed for war. And Vincenzo, you don’t have to risk this for me."

"Uncle Dominic’s been off the grid too long, Aunt Gemma. If you’re ready to bring him back into the fold, we need to move before you lose your nerve."

"You’re a true soldier, Vincenzo. Thank you."

I disconnected and paced anxiously until Vincenzo signaled from the street below. At Bee’s penthouse fortress, armed security waved us through after recognizing Vincenzo. Soon, the family matriarch appeared in the marble foyer.

"What a delightful surprise!" She clasped her jeweled hands together. "You’ve come to see your old Nonna."

"Nonna, you look absolutely radiant! There’s something different about you – spill the family secrets," Vincenzo teased, earning a subtle blush from the elderly don’s widow.

"Just your imagination, grandson." She kissed his cheek before embracing me with genuine warmth. "Please, come sit. You’ll stay for dinner, naturally."

"Another time, Bee. Right now, I desperately need intelligence on Dominic's whereabouts," I said, unable to hide the urgency in my voice.

"Child, you seem ready for war," she observed, noting how my hands trembled despite my attempts at composure.

"I am! I've been tracking Dominic since yesterday without success, and all his communication channels are dark."

"Hmm." She studied me with the calculating gaze of someone who'd survived decades in our world. "Have you decided to forgive him for his transgressions?"

"I can't survive another day without him." A tear escaped down my carefully made-up cheek. "I need to find him, Bee. And if he's taken shelter with another family, I won't back down from a fight."

"That's the fire I like to see!" She smiled with approval. "Gemma, Dominic's been maintaining a suite at a secure hotel for some time. He told me he couldn't bear staying in your shared territory without you, and he feared returning to the apartment would sabotage any chance of reconciliation. He refused sanctuary here as well, and I respected his choice for tactical reasons," she explained, giving me slight relief knowing he hadn't fled to another city's organization.

"Mama's going to eliminate him when she discovers he didn't seek protection with her crew!" Vincenzo shook his head knowingly.

"Here's the location." Bee disappeared briefly, returning with coordinates written in her careful script. "He loves you fiercely, Gemma. There's been no one else in his bed since your separation."

Vincenzo and I bid our farewells and moved swiftly toward the exit. We signaled our driver, arriving at the hotel within minutes.

"I'm providing backup, Aunt Gemma. If he's not here, we'll hit every safe house in the territory," Vincenzo declared as we exited the armored vehicle, his loyalty filling me with gratitude.

At the reception desk, we learned Dominic had checked out that morning. According to the concierge, he'd been accompanied by a striking blonde who occasionally issued orders in the commanding tone of a lieutenant.

"That has to be Zoe! And I've been waiting for her intel all day!" I fumed, recognizing the description of Dominic's most trusted operative.

I attempted contact multiple times – first reaching voicemail, then finding her completely unreachable. My frustration with her strategic games was mounting dangerously.

"What's our next tactical move, Aunt Gemma?" Vincenzo inquired.

"We start working through his inner circle," I replied as we returned to the armored sedan.

I contacted Finn first, who knew nothing beyond confirming Zoe hadn't returned to base. Jude had no actionable intelligence. Caleb mentioned Dominic hadn't visited the next generation in a while. Xavier didn't acknowledge my call. Daniel was equally uninformed. I tried reaching Xavier again without success, same result with Ruby.

"Let's check Uncle Xavier's compound, Aunt Gemma. He might have granted sanctuary," Vincenzo suggested.

"Solid thinking," I agreed.

At Xavier's fortified estate, we were escorted through multiple security checkpoints before being asked to wait in the receiving room. Soon, Xavier and Ruby appeared, both radiating the controlled tension of high-ranking family members.

"Gemma, what's the emergency?" Ruby asked immediately, her trained eyes assessing my state.

"I can't locate Dominic anywhere, Ru. I need to bring him home." My voice cracked with emotion despite my attempts at maintaining composure.

"I'll activate the network," Xavier offered, already reaching for his encrypted phone.

"I've already contacted the entire inner circle. Nobody has actionable intel, and his communications are completely dark," I explained hastily. "The only person who might have information is playing games with me."

"Zoe?" Ruby asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Exactly," I growled.

"Let me try the direct line," Xavier activated his phone while Ruby checked her encrypted messages.

"Zo," Xavier said when she answered. "Gemma's here conducting a search operation for Dominic." He listened intently, his expression shifting. "Really?" His eyebrows rose with interest. "Copy that, will comply."

Xavier ended the call and faced me with barely concealed amusement.

"What intelligence did she provide? Why is she avoiding my communications?" I demanded, barely containing my anxiety.

"She says you're too impatient for operational security and should maintain position as requested." Xavier chuckled. "She wants you to remain here at the compound."

"Why this specific location?" I questioned.

"Need-to-know basis only," Xavier replied, eyes twinkling with insider knowledge. "Gemma, why this sudden offensive to reclaim Dominic? You even recruited Vincenzo for the operation."

"Uncle Xavier, I wouldn't miss this reunion for anything. She's finally ready to forgive my uncle!" Vincenzo announced before I could formulate a response.

"About damn time!" Xavier and Ruby exclaimed in unison.

"Apparently the entire family thinks I should have launched this operation ages ago!" I protested.

"You absolutely should have, before the situation escalated!" Ruby insisted. "You owe us a full debrief later. No more operational secrets."

"I want complete details too," Xavier laughed, pulling Ruby closer in a rare display of public affection.

A while later, Xavier's compound was packed with family members. Ruby had transmitted news of my intended reconciliation with Dominic throughout the network, and our associates had decided to converge for the occasion. My reunion with Dominic had evidently become a highly anticipated family event. Then finally, Zoe materialized!

"Darling, reporting for duty!" She swept into the room with characteristic flair.

"I could have you eliminated right now, you realize that?" I said with irritation. "Making me conduct a citywide manhunt like some amateur isn't acceptable operational procedure."

"You might want me dead now, Gemma, but you'll forgive me soon. I apologize for the deception, but I had strategic reasons," Zoe embraced me warmly.

"Fine, you're pardoned. But where is he, Zo?" I asked desperately.

"Waiting at your residence. I'll provide escort." Zoe grasped my hand.

"I'll handle transportation, Zo. My driver's standing by, and I need to return to base anyway," Vincenzo offered.

"Perfect, soldier. Here's your access key, Gemma." Zoe pressed it into my palm, whispering, "Leave the past buried and claim your future."

I departed with Vincenzo providing tactical support. As we approached the house, my heart hammered so violently I feared it might betray my location to potential surveillance. When we arrived, I noticed warm light emanating from within the supposedly empty residence.

"Move out, Aunt Gemma. Find your happiness. I know Uncle loves you beyond reason!" Vincenzo encouraged me as I embraced him with profound gratitude.

The security detail opened the reinforced gate, and I advanced cautiously through the perimeter. I pushed open the heavy door and froze completely, scarcely believing the scene that awaited me in the shadows.

Chapter 310: Hearts Reunited

Gemma’s POV

When I opened the door to Dominic’s penthouse, I was greeted by a magical sight that took my breath away. The entire space glowed with scattered accent lamps creating an intimate ambiance that felt worlds apart from the brutal reality of Thorne family territory below. Above me, pearlescent transparent balloons filled with helium formed a floating canopy across the ceiling. Each balloon held a dangling white ribbon carrying either a miniature photograph of Dominic and me from our brief time together, handwritten notes filled with apologies and romantic declarations, or red cardstock hearts. I wandered through the entryway, pausing to read each message and reminisce over the captured moments of happiness we had shared before family schemes tore us apart.

By the time I reached the living room, tears were already streaming down my face. There stood Dominic, the feared Capo of the Thorne family, in that special room where we had watched countless sunrises together during those precious weeks when I thought I had found sanctuary in his dangerous world. The fluffy rugs and vibrant pillows remained untouched, exactly as we had left them. He waited with his hands tucked into his pockets, his expression a mixture of hope and anxiety. Gone was the cold mask he wore when conducting family business. The ceiling above him mirrored the entrance, adorned with more balloons carrying our memories, messages, and hearts. The same soft lamps bathed the room in a warm, golden glow, transforming his usual command center into something tender and vulnerable.

A small side table near our pillow nest held an assortment of wine, cheese, fresh fruit, and chocolates. The windows were draped with makeshift curtains fashioned from white ribbons and paper hearts in white, pink, and red. Hearts everywhere, surrounding us like promises of protection in a world where his enemies would kill for less.

"Not a single black rose in sight?" I asked with a teary smile, referencing the dark blooms that were his family's signature calling card.

"Not today," he replied, his lips curving into a smile as he crossed the room toward me. His fingers gently touched my face, and I noticed his green eyes glistening with unshed tears. "You can't possibly imagine how much I've missed you, nightingale."

"I've missed you terribly too," I whispered, placing my palm against his cheek, feeling the familiar warmth of the man who had turned the Thorne family's money laundering empire upside down trying to win me back.

"Gemma, will you forgive me for all my mistakes? For believing the lies? For letting manipulation poison my mind?" he pleaded, pressing my hands against his chest where his heart pounded. "I can't bear living without you. These months have been hell."

"Forgive me for being too stubborn and blind to see that you were as much a victim of schemes as I was," I replied, searching his eyes for the truth I had finally learned.

"There's nothing to forgive you for! Come back to me, Gemma. I'll spend every remaining day of my life adoring you and keeping you safe from this world. I'll never lie or run away again. I'll erase all your doubts about us, about my loyalty to you above all else, including family business. Just please come back to me." The desperation for my answer was evident in both his voice and gaze, this powerful man reduced to begging.

"I'm here, Dominic, and I'm never leaving again. I can't endure another day without you, even knowing what your world demands." At my words, a beautiful smile spread across his handsome face, the same expression that had first captivated me in his territory.

He cradled my face between his hands, his thumbs gently wiping away my tears. Slowly, he leaned forward and claimed my mouth in a tender, passionate kiss that tasted of redemption and promises. As our kiss deepened, his hands moved to my neck, fingers tangling pleasantly in my hair while mine traveled up his strong arms, feeling the familiar strength that had protected me from threats and revenge.

His invasion of my mouth grew more demanding, more impossible to deny. His hands descended from my hair, exploring my back, pulling me closer into his embrace with the possessive intensity that marked him as a Thorne family enforcer. Our bodies pressed together as my hands traveled to his shoulders, then to his neck, my fingers weaving through his short hair.

I trembled at his warmth against me, my breathing labored from the urgency of our kiss, my heart racing with joy knowing this dangerous, wonderful man was mine again. In his arms, I felt truly safe for the first time since our separation, protected by someone who could command armies and move mountains to keep me from harm.

After our lips parted, we remained silently holding each other for long minutes. I felt the anxiety and nervousness from the past while of convincing myself to come here melt away. All the heartache and sadness that had plagued my life these recent months, living under constant protection while Dominic's enemies circled, vanished with each exhale.

Gradually, our embrace loosened, and a profound sense of love and security washed over me. Dominic pressed a kiss to my forehead and took my hands in his, his touch gentle despite the calluses earned from years of family enforcement.

"Why did you take so long, nightingale?" Dominic sighed, gazing into my eyes with a smile that held traces of the vulnerable man hidden beneath the feared Capo.

"Because I was looking for you," I answered, returning his smile. "The real you, not the ghosts created by this world."

"All these months?" he teased, and I couldn't help but laugh despite everything we had endured.

"All these months I was being foolish and insecure, letting poison work even after the threats were dealt with." Hearing this, he pulled me into another embrace, nestling my head against his chest where I could hear his steady heartbeat.

"Oh, my goddess, you have absolutely no reason to feel that way. You're the only person in this world who matters more to me than family loyalty." He reassured me with a kiss on top of my head. "I hope you're hungry. I prepared dinner myself, no staff tonight."

"I’m starving," I admitted, and his eyes sparkled with happiness that reminded me why I had fallen for this deadly, devoted man.

We ate in the kitchen, as the dining room still lacked furniture after he had cleared out his penthouse in grief. Like the rest of the apartment, the kitchen was adorned with thousands of paper hearts scattered everywhere. Dominic pulled out my chair before I sat down, ever the gentleman despite his lethal profession. During our candlelit dinner with wine, we talked openly, releasing all the troubles that had haunted us for months, issues that now seemed so trivial compared to what we had survived.

"I nearly lost my mind when Vincenzo told me he saw you with Zander," Dominic confessed with a smile. "I dropped everything, abandoned several family meetings, and rushed back consumed by jealousy. The thought of losing you to anyone, even someone as harmless as him, was unbearable."

"But Zander is like a brother to me," I explained. "He was just helping me process everything that had happened."

"I understand that now. He was actually there for me today, helped me set all this up."

"Why did you end up hospitalized, Dominic?" I asked, concern lacing my voice as I remembered the worried reports.

"Because I drank excessively trying to forget you and numb the guilt. It didn’t work." He sighed, pain still evident in his features. "When I saw you yesterday leaving without even speaking to me, I thought you’d forgotten me completely. My world crumbled. I got drunk and landed myself in the hospital, terrifying my entire crew."

"I was hurt because you came back from handling family business and immediately sought out that woman!" I replied, bitterness coloring my words as I remembered the photo that had shattered my heart.

"What are you talking about? I never looked for her."

"Dominic, she made sure to send me a photo of her hanging on your neck at that restaurant. And I know it was recent because Finn was beside you with his cast from that warehouse raid." It sounded more accusatory than I intended, and he sighed heavily.

"I should have known she would pull that poison again. Songbird, I went to dinner with the guys because I needed information about you, but none of those idiots knew anything useful. Then she appeared out of nowhere with Elza and threw herself at me, catching me off guard for the cameras. I pushed her away immediately and had security escort her out. Ask any of the guys, or have my mother introduce you to her friend who witnessed the whole scene." He exhaled in frustration.

"No need. I believe you! I was foolish to believe those photos she orchestrated repeatedly. Just like you were foolish to believe the lies spread about us. We need to promise never to believe anything that might separate us without talking to each other first." I urged anxiously.

"I promise. You're right, we need better communication, especially in this world where enemies will use any weapon against us." He kissed my hand softly.

After dinner, between tender kisses and gentle caresses, Dominic led me to the living room, put on soft music, and we began to dance. It was a romantic ballad, and we swayed in comfortable silence, savoring each other's presence while the city lights twinkled beyond his heavily secured windows. Dominic held me close against his chest and sighed.

"I want to take you to bed. It's been so long," he whispered, his voice low but filled with desire. "I want to love you, Gemma, to reconnect in every way and prove that you're the only woman who will ever matter to me."

I gave his lips a soft kiss before answering, caressing his face and looking deeply into those green eyes that had haunted my dreams.

"That's all I want right now, to feel your body against mine, hear your moans, and watch your beautiful green eyes cloud with pleasure when you're inside me." My response ignited something primal in him, the possessive intensity that made him so dangerous and so mine.

Dominic swept me into his arms and carried me toward the bedroom with the effortless strength that came from years of family enforcement. All along the hallway, more balloons with messages and photos

hung from the ceiling, and countless hearts were scattered across the floor like a pathway guiding us back to each other and toward the future we would build together in his dark but devoted world.