Mafia Mask 321

Chapter 321: Painful Truth Revealed

Dominic’s POV

Marcus had completely lost his mind. The exiled bastard wasn’t even pretending to be a decent father anymore. His audacity to corner me at the upscale restaurant, right in the middle of Thorne family territory, was beyond comprehension.

I returned to Zenith Systems and ordered lunch delivered from our usual secure vendor rather than risk another unpleasant encounter with that waste of flesh. While eating, I called Gerard to explain what had transpired. Our head of security assured me Marcus wouldn’t get anywhere near Gemma, the children, or my mother. I then called Mom, who urged me to calm down, insisting that things would eventually resolve themselves through proper family channels.

When Mia and Zoe returned from their lunch break, I summoned them to my office. I needed to warn them too, as their proximity to me could make them potential targets in Marcus’s twisted vendetta against the family.

"Ladies, I may need to assign armed bodyguards to protect you both," I explained after detailing the situation with my exiled father.

"Dominic, take a breath. Your father hasn’t made any direct threats against us; we’re not his primary targets," Zoe said soothingly, but I couldn’t help noticing how tense Mia had become. She always seemed to freeze up whenever Marcus was mentioned.

"Mia, are you alright?" I asked, noting her slight trembling.

"Yes, Dominic, I’m fine," she answered unconvincingly.

"Mia, please be honest with me. Why do you always get so nervous whenever we discuss Marcus or when he appears?" I decided to address the elephant in the room.

I’d only recently become conscious of this pattern, but thinking back, it had always been there. Whenever Marcus showed up at family gatherings before his exile, Mia would grow anxious and find reasons to disappear. During discussions about him, her discomfort was palpable. She had always made her hatred for him clear, but I never understood the depth of her aversion.

"I just despise him, Dominic. You know that," Mia stated firmly.

"Yes, but there’s something else going on here, Mia. I’ve started to realize it’s more than simple hatred," I pressed.

"Mia, he needs to know," Zoe encouraged, squeezing Mia’s hand supportively.

"Dear God, what did that animal do to you?" I pressed my palm against my forehead, already dreading the answer. Mia sighed heavily and averted her gaze.

"I’ve been with this organization many years, Dominic. Started as a receptionist, as you know," she began, tears welling in her eyes.

"Yes, Mia. My grandfather hired you—his secretary’s daughter. I remember him saying you would be trained to replace your mother when she retired from managing the front operations," I recalled with a small smile.

"And that’s exactly what happened," she said with a half-smile. "I’m deeply grateful to your grandfather; he was an honorable man who protected his people. But your father was nothing like him—he clearly took after those worthless parasites from your grandmother’s side."

"They were indeed a pack of opportunistic scum," I agreed, thinking about my maternal grandmother’s household whom I’d struggled to purge from our operations.

"When your father was still part of the family business, I was working the front desk. He constantly lurked around me with his sleazy pickup lines," Mia continued with disgust. "I was engaged at the time, Dominic. And he was about to marry your mother. Back then, there were certain expectations in our world; women from decent families were expected to remain pure until marriage, and marriages were meant to secure family alliances."

As she spoke, tears streamed down her face. I began to piece together what she was about to reveal, and murderous rage stirred within me.

"What happened, Mia?" I gently prompted.

"Whenever my mother needed time off, your grandfather would have me cover for her in the executive wing," Mia explained, her eyes clouded with painful memories. "That particular day, my mother had to leave after lunch to take my younger brother to a doctor's appointment, and your grandfather asked me to fill in. But he had meetings with other family heads and wouldn't be back for hours. Your father called me into his office, locked the door, and refused to let me leave."

Mia broke down completely, sobbing before me. Zoe took over, still holding Mia's hand firmly.

"Dominic, your father raped Mia and then threatened her," Zoe continued as Mia wept. "He told her she was nobody and that if she spoke up, no one would believe her word against a made man. He said he'd have her and her mother eliminated and would destroy her entire bloodline. She believed him—she was so young, and he wielded the family's power and connections—so she remained silent."

"That fucking animal!" I slammed my fist on the desk, tears now running down my own face.

"He destroyed everything, Dominic," Mia managed between sobs.

"Mia told her fiancé, who refused to believe her. He accused her of sleeping with the boss to climb the ranks and abandoned her," Zoe explained. "Her mother Gwen knew everything—that's why she delayed her retirement for so long."

"That's true—Gwen only retired when I took over operations. That's when I brought Mia to the executive floor; she was working as assistant to our financial director then," I recalled. "I always assumed your mother simply loved her position."

"She did love it; your grandfather was wonderful to work for. But she stayed primarily to protect me," Mia revealed. "My ex-fiancé caused a terrible scene when he discovered I wasn't pure, but my mother believed me and did everything possible to keep your father from touching me again."

"Mia, I don’t even know how to begin apologizing for something so unforgivable," I said, devastated by this revelation.

"You bear no responsibility for the atrocities that despicable monster commits," Mia said, squeezing my hand.

"Does my mother know about this?" I asked carefully.

"No, only my household, my husband, and Zoe, who has this uncanny ability to sense when something’s wrong," she said with a small smile toward Zoe.

"Mia, may I share this with my inner circle?" I asked cautiously.

"Of course, Dominic. It’s been many years; perhaps it would be good for your people to know, especially now that you’re all confronting past betrayals," Mia agreed.

"Mia, nothing can undo the harm that monster inflicted on you, but I want to do something," I offered, desperate to make some small amends.

"You already do, Dominic. You’re a good man who treats me with respect, always thinking of me, valuing my work. You’re more than just my boss," Mia smiled, wiping away tears.

"We’re family, Mia," I smiled back. "You know how much I care about you."

"I know, dear. And it’s mutual. Besides, nothing could match the satisfaction I felt when you took control of operations, and especially when you had that monster exiled from our territory," Mia said with genuine happiness.

I stood and embraced my loyal assistant. I reiterated my concerns about her security, but she insisted it wasn’t necessary.

"You know what? I’m giving you something you can’t refuse," I declared. "Zoe, book Mia and her husband for next weekend at that exclusive resort you recommended—the best couple’s package with full security detail. Mia deserves it."

"Oh, I’d never turn down a luxury retreat. Is it the one you mentioned, Zoe?" Mia’s eyes brightened.

"That’s the one, sweetheart. You’ll absolutely love it!" Zoe smiled at her and winked at me, clearly signaling I’d chosen the perfect gift.

By day’s end, all I wanted was to go home and hold Gemma close for the rest of the night. I was completely drained, with no energy left for anything else. Unfortunately, it would still be some time before I could get my much-needed rest.

Chapter 322: Creating Our Sanctuary

Gemma’s POV

I had been buzzing with anticipation ever since Maia, Dominic’s trusted housekeeper who managed his estate, called after lunch. "The furniture has arrived," she’d said, her warm voice instantly lifting my spirits. Maia was more than just household staff—she was the guardian of Dominic’s fortress, running everything with military precision while maintaining maternal warmth. We’d developed a wonderful bond since I’d become part of Dominic’s world, and she always kept me informed about matters concerning our home, especially the furniture delivery.

My excitement sustained me through the remaining hours at Caleb’s front company offices. I practically floated out of the building, but when I slipped into Dominic’s armored Mercedes, his demeanor immediately caught my attention. Though he greeted me with a kiss and a protective embrace, tension radiated from him like the heat from his concealed weapons.

"My handsome, what’s troubling you?" I gently probed, studying his battle-worn features.

He exhaled deeply, his jaw tight. "It’s been a bloody awful day, Gemma. I just want to spend tonight holding you close."

"What happened, Dominic?" My concern deepened as he released me and started the engine, his knuckles white against the steering wheel.

"Marcus," he answered simply, his emerald eyes hardening with familiar rage.

"What has that bastard done now?" I pressed, knowing his exiled father remained a constant threat to our family.

As we drove through Thorne territory toward his estate, Dominic recounted his father's latest intimidation tactics and veiled threats, followed by disturbing intelligence that Mia had been one of Marcus's victims during his time in the family. My stomach churned with each horrific revelation about the man who shared Dominic's blood.

"I confess I wasn't taking this demon seriously enough before, but he's far more dangerous than I imagined," I said as we passed through the estate's security gates.

"I question every day how I could be the son of such a despicable monster," Dominic sighed, his shoulders bearing the weight of his bloodline's sins.

"Don't torment yourself with that," I urged, pulling him close for a reassuring kiss before we approached the front entrance. "Focus on just one thing now..."

"What's that?" he asked, his powerful arms encircling my waist possessively.

"Our furniture has arrived!" I couldn't contain my smile.

His brow furrowed. "Wasn't the delivery scheduled for later this week?"

"I made a quick call yesterday and expedited it through some connections. Which means we have considerable work ahead."

"Christ, my goddess..." Dominic groaned. "I'm exhausted from dealing with family business. Let Maia handle it with her crew."

"Absolutely not, Dominic!" I planted my hands on my hips defiantly. "If you want me living in this fortress with you, then you'll help me make it our sanctuary."

His eyes softened at my declaration. "You look magnificent when you talk about sharing this life with me and claiming this house as ours."

"Then do your part so I can keep saying it," I teased, leaning in for another kiss.

"Alright! Let's spend the evening creating our perfect home." He pushed open the reinforced door and led me inside.

Dominic's expression fell dramatically when he saw the mountain of boxes and furniture scattered throughout the main living area. I was too elated to sympathize with his dismay. Maia greeted us warmly, and I embraced her while bouncing with excitement.

"Gemma, I've arranged for two trusted staff members to assist with the heavy lifting. Dinner's prepared whenever you're ready," Maia reported with her usual efficiency.

"Perfect, Maia. We'll clean up first, have dinner, then begin organizing. But you and the others should retire early—we can secure additional help tomorrow if needed." Dominic looked puzzled at this, so I explained, "Caleb granted me tomorrow off to establish our home properly. He's already fishing for a dinner invitation to see the results."

"What a calculating friend," Dominic laughed, some tension finally leaving his shoulders.

"Want to hear the best part?" I asked, tugging him toward the staircase.

"Tell me."

"Zoe cleared your schedule tomorrow too." His eyes widened in genuine surprise.

"She didn't inform me... In that case, we could postpone all this until tomorrow and rest tonight." He attempted to distract me with heated kisses along my throat.

"Not a chance! I'm far too excited!"

After dinner, we began the task of arranging our sanctuary. Maia had efficiently supervised the placement of major pieces according to my detailed instructions, so our job involved mainly unwrapping and personalizing. We worked well past midnight, completing the upper floor to perfection. Noticing Dominic's drooping eyelids, I decided to curtail my enthusiasm.

"Let's save the remainder for tomorrow. Come here—you've been so helpful, you deserve a hot shower and a thorough massage." His weary expression immediately transformed into something predatory and suggestive.

"Finally! Though your hands on my body tend to arouse rather than relax me."

"So you're refusing the massage?" I asked with feigned innocence.

"I want it desperately, but I crave much more than just that."

"Anything you desire."

I began slowly removing my clothing as we entered the master bedroom, moving deliberately toward the marble bathroom. Dominic's eyes darkened with hunger as he quickly followed, his powerful frame pressing mine against the cold shower wall. He was already rigid with need, taking me right there with precise, commanding thrusts that brought me to a shattering climax, his name torn from my lips in ecstasy.

After our shower, we collapsed onto the bed where his hands worshipped my body with reverent intensity. His mouth claimed my most sensitive places, making me arch and gasp as waves of pleasure consumed me. After bringing me to another devastating peak, he positioned himself above me, and we

made slow, passionate love, our bodies moving in perfect synchronization. We finally collapsed in complete exhaustion, utterly satisfied.

We slept entwined in each other's arms, and the next morning, I woke him with my mouth wrapped around his hardness, savoring him like the most exquisite indulgence.

"You're absolutely insatiable," he whispered during breakfast, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"That's because you're devastatingly attractive," I replied with a wink.

"Seriously, my goddess, your appetite is incredible and you genuinely worship pleasure. I find that absolutely intoxicating!" His expression was deliciously wicked.

"You know, before you claimed me, I wasn't like this," I admitted. "I didn't crave it nearly as much. You've transformed me into someone just as wicked as you."

Dominic laughed richly. "Are you saying I'm responsible for your sexual hunger?"

"That's exactly what I'm confessing. One look at you ignites fire in my veins. My body responds instantly." I leaned close to his ear and whispered, "And I adore taking you in my mouth until you surrender completely, just like you did this morning."

"You wicked little temptress!" Dominic pulled me into his arms for a kiss that melted my core.

"Don't start now—we have work to finish. If we're efficient, we can indulge earlier tonight." I promised him with a seductive smile.

"I'll hold you to that vow!" He released me with a playful swat to my rear.

We tackled the lower floor while Maia supervised upstairs. When we reached the formal dining room, I couldn't contain my joy seeing our massive table—purchased with exact calculations for how many family members and allies would regularly gather in our home.

"I see the table brings you the most joy," Dominic observed, embracing me from behind protectively.

"Dominic, growing up it was just my mother, grandmother, and me. I never had many friends—essentially none, except Lila when I started working, and Zander since we met. Now I have you, your loyal household, our chosen family... How could I not be euphoric?"

"My goddess, my circle was also tiny—just Caleb, Xavier, and Jude. Then you women entered our world and expanded everything. That brings me immense happiness too."

"I can’t wait to host everyone here."

"Neither can I, but first, I want to unite our families. I want our mothers to meet on neutral ground."

"When were you thinking?"

"Later this week!"

"Perfect! Let’s finish quickly then—we’re already well into the week, and I have a significant dinner to organize." I gave him a quick kiss before returning to work.

By evening, our fortress was completely arranged, and we were exactly where we belonged—tangled in bed, christening our new sanctuary properly.

Chapter 323: Mothers Meet at Last

Dominic’s POV

The day had finally arrived—the high-stakes dinner where we’d introduce our mothers to each other. This wasn’t just any family gathering; in the Thorne family hierarchy, bringing together the matriarchs from both sides carried significant weight. Gemma had orchestrated every detail with the precision of a military operation, refusing to let me handle even the guest arrangements. Her excitement radiated through our heavily fortified penthouse as she prepared for the evening. When I walked through the

reinforced door, she was already dressed in an elegant outfit that accentuated her beauty, directing the final security and table arrangements.

"My handsome capo, you're home!" She rushed over with a radiant smile, greeting me with a warm kiss that temporarily made me forget the weight of the gun holster beneath my jacket.

"I think I should make a habit of arriving after you if this is the welcome I get," I murmured, pulling her closer for another kiss that left her breathless, my hands automatically checking the concealed weapons she now carried as second nature.

"Maybe you should," she replied, her voice slightly unsteady as she pulled away. "But now you need to get ready. The family will be here soon, and you know how the family values punctuality at these gatherings."

With reluctance, I released her and headed for the shower, my mind already shifting to the evening's dynamics. When I returned to the living room, Gemma was admiring her handiwork—the perfectly set table gleaming under bulletproof lighting while delicious aromas wafted from the kitchen, where our trusted household staff had prepared everything under our trusted security oversight.

"Everything looks incredible," I said, genuinely impressed by her attention to detail. "Do you think your mother will approve of entering our world more formally?"

"She'll be thrilled. I don't understand why you're so nervous—my mom already thinks you're the perfect protector for me."

"But this is different. We're living together now, under family protection."

"Say that again," she requested, her eyes sparkling with the same intensity that had first caught my attention during that fateful confrontation in her old neighborhood.

"What part?"

"The part about us living together under Thorne protection."

"We’re living together under Thorne protection," I repeated, savoring each word and the security it represented.

"I never tire of hearing that." She leaned in for another kiss, only to pull away at the sound of our reinforced doorbell’s distinctive chime. "Our first guests are here! Come on!"

She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the entrance. Nadia and her household stood on our doorstep, flanked by their usual discrete security detail. My sister embraced Gemma with genuine affection while Gerard greeted us with the warm smile of a fellow family member. I noticed my nephews carrying backpacks, which struck me as odd. Were they planning to handle family business communications after dinner?

"Dominic, I thought I’d never see the day!" Gerard clapped me on the shoulder with the easy familiarity of someone who’d proven his loyalty through countless family operations. "It’s about time someone else hosted a family council gathering."

His joke earned hearty laughter from all of us, the tension of our dangerous world momentarily lifted.

"I think Gemma might be ending Nadia’s monopoly on family Sunday meetings," I replied with a grin, knowing how seriously the Thorne organization took these regular gatherings.

"You haven’t heard?" Gerard’s expression turned amused. "They’ve already divided the schedule—alternating Sundays between safe houses, holidays split evenly between territories. You should have seen them negotiating. Like lawyers hammering out a territorial agreement."

"When did this happen?" I turned to Gemma, surprised that family logistics had been discussed without my knowledge.

"While you were handling business downtown, handsome!" She winked playfully, referring to my recent debt collection rounds in our expanded territory.

Gerard leaned closer, whispering, "She’s got you completely wrapped around her finger—just like Nadia does with me. You’ll be following her orders before you know it, and in our world, that’s not necessarily a bad thing."

Soon everyone was settled in the living room with drinks in hand, the atmosphere carefully balanced between family warmth and the underlying awareness of our shared dangerous reality. The doorbell chimed again, and Gemma pulled me along to answer it. This time it was her mother Willow, Ryder, and Zander—now officially under Thorne family protection.

They had barely stepped inside when the security system announced another arrival. I opened the door to find my mother standing there with—Dr. Andrew Taylor? Irritation flashed through me. This was supposed to be a family dinner within our protected circle. Before I could react, Gemma brushed past me, delivering a subtle but painful pinch to my ribs that nearly made me yelp.

"Bee! I’m so glad you could make it! Dr. Taylor, welcome to our home," Gemma greeted them warmly, her diplomatic skills rivaling those of any family consigliere.

"Please, call me Andrew, my dear," he insisted, kissing her cheeks and presenting her with a gift—something that would have been thoroughly security-checked before reaching our door.

"Welcome," I managed, giving my mother a questioning look that she expertly ignored while Gemma’s warning glare wasn’t lost on me.

As we rejoined the others, I was surprised to discover that Andrew already knew Gemma’s household. They greeted each other like old friends—a connection that spoke well for his discretion regarding our family’s legitimate business fronts. I introduced my mother to Willow and the others, noting how naturally everyone fell into the careful dance of conversation that avoided sensitive topics.

"What a coincidence!" Andrew exclaimed. "Bee, Zander here is the most promising trauma surgeon in my emergency department. Invaluable for our more challenging cases."

"You’re too generous, Dr. Taylor," Zander replied, though I noticed the slight emphasis that suggested he understood exactly which "challenging cases" Andrew meant.

"Good to know where to seek medical attention when needed," my mother remarked with her characteristic charm, the comment carrying layers of meaning in our world.

The conversation flowed easily, with laughter filling our secured home. Suddenly, Vincenzo stood up with the unusual formality that marked him as a future family member, requesting everyone's attention with the bearing of someone already learning the weight of Thorne family expectations.

"If I could have a moment," my nephew began, sounding remarkably mature for his age. "I believe everyone is as curious as I am—no offense, Dr. Taylor, you seem like someone who understands discretion—but I was surprised to see you arrive with Grandma. This is a family dinner, after all. Could you explain the nature of this relationship, Grandma?"

Vincenzo had voiced the very question I'd been too cautious to ask directly, demonstrating the diplomatic skills that would serve him well in family operations.

"Of course, darling," my mother rose gracefully, her poise reflecting years of navigating the complex social dynamics of our world. "Although most of you know Andrew professionally, I'd like to formally introduce him as my partner." She delivered the news with the straightforward honesty that had always been her trademark.

Vincenzo turned pale, mirroring my own reaction when I'd first learned of their relationship. What surprised me most was Nadia's response. My sister approached our mother, her expression serious as she searched her eyes before declaring, "It's about time, Mom! After everything our family has been through, you deserve happiness." She embraced our mother warmly—not the reaction I'd expected, but absolutely appropriate given our mother's years of sacrifice for family loyalty.

"Gemma, your family dinners keep getting more interesting!" Gerard laughed, raising his glass to Gemma, who was clearly amused by the expressions on Vincenzo's face and mine.

"Well, Andrew, you're officially part of the family circle now," I said, clapping him on the shoulder with enough force to test his mettle. "Just know that if you hurt my mother, the consequences will be severe."

Everyone laughed, understanding both the warmth and the very real warning in my words. A sense of harmony settled over our gathered families, the bonds of blood and choice strengthening our protective

circle. Gemma took countless photos, determined to document every moment of our life together in her growing album of family memories. But the night was young, and in our world, peace was always fragile—I couldn't help wondering if our newfound equilibrium might face challenges before the evening ended.

Chapter 324: Unwelcome Guest Arrives

Dominic's POV

The atmosphere in my heavily fortified penthouse dining room radiated warmth and contentment as conversation flowed effortlessly around the mahogany table. My mother and Nadia engaged in animated discussion, their occasional approving glances toward Gemma and me revealing their genuine delight about our relationship within the family hierarchy.

Everything had unfolded perfectly for this gathering of the Thorne family inner circle. Willow and my mother had formed an instant connection, conversing like veteran mafia wives who had navigated the treacherous waters of this life for decades rather than hours. They were already enthusiastically discussing the prospect of future heirs to carry on the family bloodline, their eyes sparkling with anticipation whenever they looked at Gemma and me together.

The unexpected chime of the reinforced security intercom cut through our pleasant gathering, causing me to exchange a sharp, concerned glance with Gemma. Every guest we were expecting for this private family meeting had already arrived through our carefully monitored checkpoints.

"I'll handle it, handsome," Gemma said, rising from her chair. I couldn't resist stealing a quick kiss on her cheek before she moved toward the security panel.

When she returned, her expression had transformed from serene to absolutely murderous. Behind her strutted Marcus, his arrogance as insufferable as ever as he entered my secured territory uninvited.

"Ah, the entire family council gathered. How touching!" he announced, acting as if he still held any legitimate claim to be here.

"Dominic, I couldn't stop him," Gemma explained, fury blazing in her dark eyes. "The perimeter guards let him through."

"Don’t worry, Gemma. I’ll deal with this piece of filth personally," I replied, feeling the familiar cold rage building inside me like a brewing storm.

Gerard immediately positioned himself beside me, hand instinctively moving toward his concealed weapon. "I’ll assist you, Dominic."

"I can already tell who this scumbag is," Zander added, rising to his feet with predatory grace. "Count me in for the removal operation."

Marcus, completely unfazed by the barely restrained violence directed at him, casually settled into the nearest leather armchair as if he owned the place. "Such hostility from my own blood! I merely came to join the family dinner. The real outsider here is Andrew Taylor, wouldn’t you agree?" He looked directly at me with that familiar twisted smirk. "Now, pour me some of that expensive whiskey, son."

Something primal snapped inside me. I lunged forward, grabbing him by his expensive Italian suit collar with enough force to cut off his air supply. "You worthless parasite, get out of my territory now!" I growled, my voice dropping to the dangerous octave that had made grown men beg for mercy.

"Oh, Dominic, always so theatrical. You love putting on a show," Marcus mocked, showing no fear despite the murderous intent radiating from every man in the room. "I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying for dinner with my family. And I’m considering taking up residence here with you and the delectable Gemma." His eyes raked over her body with the kind of predatory hunger that made my blood turn to liquid fire.

"You’re disgusting!" Gemma shouted, visibly revolted by his violation. "Get this vermin out of here, Dominic. I don’t want this trash contaminating our home!"

From my peripheral vision, I saw Willow smoothly taking command of the situation. "Nadia, let’s escort Carmen upstairs immediately. Come, Bee." Her calm authority, honed through years as a mafia wife, was impressive as she efficiently guided the women away from the impending bloodshed.

Marcus’s predatory gaze followed their retreat. "Magnificent! Is that your mother, Gemma? She’s as stunning as you are. Despite her age, she’s still quite appetizing!"

Before I could react to this ultimate insult, a blur of lethal movement shot past me. Ryder had tackled Marcus to the marble floor, landing a bone-crushing punch that split his lip and sent blood spattering across the expensive Persian rug. More crimson trickled down Marcus's chin as Ryder gripped him by his shirt collar, shaking him like a rag doll.

"That's enough, you miserable waste of oxygen!" Ryder snarled with the controlled fury of a seasoned enforcer. "You're a pathetic piece of garbage, a despicable excuse for a human being. Now shut your filthy mouth and crawl back to whatever hole you emerged from."

Marcus's smile was absolutely demonic as he stared defiantly up at Ryder, blood staining his teeth. "I'm in my son's house, and I'm not leaving."

"I already told you I disowned you long ago!" I roared, feeling murderous rage pulsing through every vein in my body like molten steel. "And if you won't leave voluntarily, I'll personally throw you off the balcony."

"If you'll permit me, Dominic," Andrew interjected, his usually composed demeanor now twisted with lethal anger, "I'd be honored to assist Ryder with that task. Contact your security team to remove this parasite from your doorstep."

While I grabbed my encrypted phone to summon our armed security detail, Andrew and Ryder hauled Marcus toward the reinforced exit. Zander, Vincenzo, and Gerard followed in tight formation as we escorted them through the bulletproof corridors. Once outside, we unceremoniously hurled him onto the concrete just as our black SUVs pulled up with tactical precision.

Before being forced into the armored security vehicle, Marcus shouted one final threat that nearly pushed me past the point of no return.

"I'm going to make Gemma my personal plaything, Dominic," he laughed with maniacal glee. "And I'll broadcast the footage across every screen so you can watch your woman submit."

Homicidal fury consumed me completely. If not for Andrew and Ryder physically restraining me, I might have painted the sidewalk with his blood right there. After security transported him beyond our

territory, we returned to the penthouse. Before rejoining the family, I summoned the head of security for an immediate debriefing.

"Explain to me how such a catastrophic breach occurred. Your men are completely incompetent!" I snarled at the security chief in the monitoring room.

"Sir, they're recent additions to our payroll. I sincerely apologize. Their background checks were thorough," he explained as we reviewed the damning surveillance footage showing two guards accepting what appeared to be substantial payment before granting Marcus access.

"WHAT THE HELL POSSESSED THEM TO TAKE BRIBES?" I roared, pointing at the incriminating evidence.

Their shameful silence confirmed their guilt. I terminated them immediately, stripping all benefits and ordering their permanent banishment from Thorne family territory.

"One more security failure like this and you'll be joining them in exile, Reed," I warned the security chief with deadly seriousness.

"It won't happen again, sir. You have my word," he assured me with appropriate gravity as I stormed out.

When I returned to the dining room, Gemma was waiting by the doorway. She wrapped her arms around me, her gentle caress on the nape of my neck instantly dissolving the murderous tension from my muscles. With her warm body pressed against mine, the rage melted away like ice in fire. Within moments, my breathing steadied and my heartbeat returned to normal rhythm. I kissed her soft lips, grateful beyond words to have her strength anchoring me.

"I love you more than life itself," she whispered against my lips.

"And I love you," I replied, stealing another tender kiss and sighing with deep contentment.

"Let's continue our dinner," Gemma said, taking my hand with practiced ease. "That unfortunate interruption won't ruin our first family gathering in our new home."

Peace gradually returned as we rejoined everyone in the elegant dining room. Conversation had resumed, genuine smiles had returned to every face, and the atmosphere was once again light and pleasant. Gemma had outdone herself with the meal, everything perfectly coordinated and delicious.

After dinner concluded, I approached Willow about pending residential arrangements.

"Willow, have you decided what you're doing with your current apartment? I'm coordinating Gemma's relocation next week." I was curious whether she needed assistance with her transition plans.

"Oh yes, Dominic. Zander will assume the lease. He's currently sharing space with an incompatible roommate. He can keep all the existing furniture as well," Willow explained.

"That's an excellent solution!" I was genuinely pleased with this arrangement. "Zander, when do you want to complete the move?"

"Boss, if Gemma doesn't object, tomorrow itself. She can take her time transferring her belongings, but I can't tolerate my current roommate anymore. The guy's an absolute slob," Zander complained with obvious disgust.

"Oh right, Zander absolutely despises mess," Gemma teased affectionately. "He made me clean the apartment thoroughly the other day."

"My goddess, don't complain about that. Thanks to his obsessiveness, you discovered my note," I smiled at Gemma with pure adoration.

"And thanks to me, she decided to return to you!" Zander added with obvious pride.

"Sure, he's practically the fairy godfather of this relationship," Vincenzo mocked playfully. "Just don't forget that I was the one who searched the entire city with her and brought her back to you, uncle."

"Is this kid always this bold?" Zander laughed appreciatively.

"You haven’t witnessed anything yet!" I replied, making everyone burst into genuine laughter.

The remainder of the evening progressed smoothly and peacefully. Though I was growing increasingly eager to be alone with Gemma, to lose myself completely in her beautiful body without any interruption, the night still held one more surprise in store for me.

Chapter 325: Week Long Surprise

Dominic’s POV

Our family gathering at the secure compound was winding down, with everyone exchanging final embraces and farewells. Nadia and Quentin were the last senior members to leave, yet I noticed with confusion that Vincenzo and Carmen remained comfortably seated on our new armored couch in the reinforced living room.

"Time to head back to the main house, you two," I said with a gentle smile, assuming they were simply tired from the day’s family council activities.

Carmen looked up at me with that precocious expression she often wore. "We’ve already said goodbye to them, Uncle!"

I glanced through the bulletproof windows, watching Nadia turn to wave one final time before disappearing through the fortified gate. Gemma was waving back cheerfully from our secured entrance. My gaze shifted between my niece and nephew sprawled on my couch and my woman, who sealed the reinforced door with a suspiciously wide grin, blowing me a kiss as she passed.

"Now, my precious ones," Gemma announced dramatically, settling herself between the kids, "I demand a foot massage!"

Without hesitation, Vincenzo slid onto the carpet, carefully removed her shoes, and began massaging one foot. Carmen snuggled against Gemma’s arm as they excitedly discussed weekend plans for activities within the compound.

"Join us, Uncle," Vincenzo called out. "I'll take one foot, you take the other."

I felt laughter bubbling up but complied, sitting beside my nephew on the floor. "Would someone care to explain what exactly is happening here?" I asked, taking Gemma's other foot while keeping my ear tuned for any security alerts.

"Mmm, that feels heavenly," Gemma purred, exchanging a conspiratorial smile with Carmen. "Want to share our little secret with Uncle Dominic, Carmen?"

"May I?" Carmen asked eagerly, continuing after Gemma's nod. "We're staying with you for several days in the new safe house!" Her green eyes sparkled with excitement.

"What a shock," I replied, sarcasm dripping from every word. "Your parents couldn't even let us settle into our secured perimeter properly before pawning off you two troublemakers."

Vincenzo laughed beside me. "Come on, Uncle. You're absolutely thrilled to have your favorite niece and nephew staying in your fortress."

"Oh yes, I can barely contain my overwhelming joy," I grumbled. "And why didn't my goddess mention this protective custody arrangement?"

"Helloooo," Carmen interrupted, waving her hand for attention. "It was supposed to be a surprise, silly!"

I couldn't help laughing, suddenly understanding why they'd arrived with overnight bags packed with secure communication devices. I had to admit, having these two under my direct protection for the weekend might actually be reassuring given the recent territorial tensions.

We lingered in the living room, sharing stories and laughter while the compound's security system hummed quietly around us. Carmen demonstrated her latest ballet moves, Vincenzo recounted the trials of being in his later teens in a mafia family, and Gemma entertained us with tales of her own rebellious teenage years before joining our world.

Watching them, I felt a strange yearning stirring within me—the desire for children of our own blood to protect and guide through this dangerous life. My mother and Willow had planted that seed earlier during family discussions about legacy, and it was starting to take root in my mind.

When Gemma finally suggested the kids prepare for rest, they begged for a movie night with popcorn in the secured entertainment room. Of course, Gemma immediately loved the idea, much to my chagrin.

"Everyone change into night clothes and meet in the upstairs secure viewing room," Gemma instructed, standing up. "Carmen sweetie, could you take my shoes to the walk-in safe, please?"

"Sure!" Carmen grabbed the shoes enthusiastically before heading upstairs with Vincenzo toward the reinforced sleeping quarters.

"I'll help you, goddess," I offered, following Gemma to the kitchen where our food supplies were stored behind concealed panels.

While she prepared the popcorn, I gathered containers, cups, and beverages, arranging everything on a tray as Gemma filled the bowls with freshly popped kernels, the familiar domestic routine contrasting sharply with the weapons cache hidden behind false cabinets.

"My goddess," I began casually, "what's behind this surprise protective custody with my niece and nephew? We just reconciled after the bloodshed—I thought you'd want more private time with me."

"Darling, I adore these kids!" Gemma replied cheerfully. "The compound is enormous, and since I'm not working next week at Caleb's front operation—"

"Wait, why aren't you working?" I interrupted, already fantasizing about whisking her away on my yacht to international waters for a private getaway.

"There's an extended period starting later this week, and Caleb gave me the full week off because I'm such an exemplary employee in his legitimate enterprises."

"I'd forgotten about that operational pause," I admitted. "Perhaps I should give Zoe time off too, so I can spend it holding you close without surveillance duties."

"That would be wonderful!" Gemma reached for some imported chocolates from our secure pantry, adding them to our tray.

"Perfect. I'll need to compensate for behaving myself this weekend with the children under our protection," I winked suggestively.

Gemma grabbed the beverage bottle, her expression suspiciously innocent. "Actually, my darling," she started walking toward the stairs, "they're staying the entire week."

"The wh—" I choked mid-sentence. "What do you mean 'the entire week,' Gemma?"

"Nadia and Quentin are leaving for Monaco shortly," she explained, already ascending the reinforced staircase.

"Monaco for family business?" I felt panic rising at the thought of international complications.

"That's the only one I know of. They're having a sort of delayed honeymoon under family protection." Her calm tone was maddening as I rushed to catch up.

"When are they returning? Are the little ones really staying under our direct protection? What will we do with them during lockdown?" My heart was racing uncomfortably.

"Handsome," Gemma paused at the top of the secured stairs, "they're staying with us, and we'll have a fantastic time as long as we don't lose them or let them compromise security protocols. There's plenty we can do together within the compound. But..."

"But what, Gemma?" I was nearly in distress. I'd never spent this much consecutive time with my niece and nephew under protection protocols. Sure, Vincenzo had stayed over before during minor territorial disputes, but he was self-sufficient, and Nadia was always just a secure call away. Carmen was still so young, and their parents would be in international territory.

"I’m not entirely sure their parents are coming back," Gemma said with alarming seriousness.

"Don’t joke about abandonment in this business!" I felt genuine terror before she burst into laughter.

"Relax, Dominic! They’ll return by week’s end," she assured me, clearly amused by my distress.

When we entered the secure viewing room, the kids were already arguing about movie selection—Vincenzo advocating for action films while Carmen pushed for animated features.

This was going to be an unbearably long week of protective custody.

"Let’s compromise with comedy," Gemma intervened smoothly. "Pick something that’ll make me laugh." Their argument instantly ceased. "I’ll change into comfortable clothes and be right back."

I noticed the kids wearing matching cartoon pajamas and found it amusing despite our circumstances. Before I could comment, Gemma pulled me toward our fortified bedroom.

"Nadia certainly has interesting taste, buying matching sleepwear for her children," I chuckled as we entered our secured room, and Gemma handed me a folded garment.

"I’m delighted you approve, handsome, but it wasn’t Nadia," Gemma replied with a mischievous smile as she retrieved her own night clothes.

Several minutes later, despite my protests about maintaining dignity befitting a Capo, I sat in the secure viewing room with the love of my life and my sister’s children, all wearing coordinating Homer Simpson pajamas while the compound’s defense systems maintained their silent vigil.

Oh, Gemma would definitely pay for this breach of my fearsome reputation—I’d make absolutely certain of it.

Chapter 326: Dog Debt Collection

Gemma’s POV

I adored Carmen and Vincenzo with all my heart. When Nadia mentioned her desire to accompany Gerard on a business trip to the family’s territories in Chicago, I immediately jumped at the opportunity to offer my help. "Go handle the family affairs," I told her. "Dominic and I will take care of the kids." The look of gratitude on her face was worth everything.

That’s why I paid extra to have the furniture delivered ahead of schedule. Every penny spent was an investment in creating a perfect environment for the children. I also requested a few days off from Don Caleb’s legitimate operations, which he granted without hesitation. This would be wonderful - I needed this peaceful break from the constant tension of family business, and I was eager to see Dominic interact with his niece and nephew. After all, we were building our life together now within the Thorne family structure.

Dominic’s reaction when he discovered the children would be staying with us was priceless. His expression fluctuated between laughter and panic. I decided to reveal the details gradually, savoring each change in his facial expressions. I secretly took photos of every reaction, capturing moments he wasn’t even aware of.

When he frantically climbed the stairs after learning the kids would be with us for several days, I nearly collapsed with laughter. But the absolute highlight was his face when I presented him with "The Simpsons" pajamas that matched mine and the children’s - that expression was worth framing! Even a feared Capo could be reduced to stunned silence by cartoon sleepwear.

The children doubled over with laughter when they saw their dangerous uncle in the matching pajamas. I kept snapping pictures of everything. After the surprise reunion he orchestrated for us following our reconciliation, I decided to create a lifelong album of our moments together. I was certain I would spend my entire future with him in this world of shadows and power, so I began capturing every significant and mundane moment, often when he wasn’t looking.

We watched a hilarious comedy together, and the kids teased their uncle endlessly. By the end of the night, Dominic was thoroughly enjoying himself. I witnessed the tenderness with which he said goodnight to Carmen and the camaraderie he developed with Vincenzo. This man would someday be the father of my children - granted, I still needed to convince him to have kids in this dangerous world we inhabited, but regardless, I felt secure in my choice.

The following morning when we entered the kitchen, the kids were already waiting for us. Vincenzo, with his outgoing and spontaneous personality, was entertaining Maia and Carmen with a story about one of the family's legitimate business deals that had them both laughing.

"Good morning, kids!" I greeted as I walked in, and they rushed to embrace me. "Good morning, Maia."

As we settled down for breakfast, I noticed Carmen couldn't take her eyes off Dominic, studying him with the calculating gaze that seemed to run in the Frost bloodline.

"Alright, Carmen, just say whatever's on your mind because your staring is making me uncomfortable," Dominic commented while enjoying a bite of his omelet, his voice carrying that edge that made grown men in the organization tremble.

"How do you know I want to talk to you?" Carmen narrowed her eyes suspiciously, completely unimpressed by her uncle's reputation.

"Because you're exactly like your mother - when you want to say something, you stare at people until they acknowledge you," Dominic explained matter-of-factly, his tone softer than when he dealt with family business.

"Mom totally does that. Dad says it's super annoying when she's planning family strategy," Vincenzo laughed, and Dominic made a gesture confirming the sentiment.

"We have business matters to discuss, Frost!" Carmen declared, adopting the serious posture of someone who had grown up around power negotiations, which made Vincenzo laugh even harder.

"What are you laughing at?" Dominic turned to him with genuine curiosity.

"Uncle, you know the saying about debts in our world? Well, it's even worse when the creditor is Carmen - owing her anything means she'll collect with the persistence of a loan shark," Vincenzo explained through his laughter.

"But I don’t owe you anything, Carmen," Dominic replied, genuinely confused about what family obligation he might have overlooked.

"You made a promise, Frost! And I haven’t seen any results," Carmen complained firmly, her tone reminding me exactly of the way Don Caleb addressed subordinates who failed to deliver.

The scene was absolutely comical - Carmen with her serious business demeanor, Dominic utterly confused despite his reputation for strategic thinking, and Vincenzo howling with laughter. I couldn’t help joining in, knowing this was the kind of normalcy we rarely experienced in our world.

"Refresh my memory, dear niece," Dominic set down his fork and gave Carmen his full attention, treating her with the same respect he showed to family associates.

"A dog. A cute, furry, four-legged creature. I’m still waiting for one to appear at my house," Carmen replied with perfect sarcasm that would make any Frost proud.

"Hmph," Dominic grunted. "Carmen, our arrangement didn’t exactly work out as planned due to certain family complications."

"It’s not my fault if you’re incompetent at keeping promises. I did everything you asked me to do during the situation with Gemma," Carmen crossed her delicate arms defiantly.

"Don’t you think you’re being a bit disrespectful to a Capo?" Dominic narrowed his eyes at her, though his tone remained playful.

"I think sooner or later you’ll need my help again, and being in debt to me won’t help you secure my cooperation," Carmen calmly sipped her juice with the composure of someone born into this life.

"I think you should honor your debts, Dominic!" I teased him, knowing family loyalty extended to keeping promises to children.

"Yeah, uncle, the worst part is that with your talent for creating complicated situations, you’ll need our assistance again very soon," Vincenzo joined in.

"Et tu, Gemma?" Dominic looked at me with surprise. "And I don't see how this involves you, Vincenzo."

"Well, if Mom lets Carmen have a dog, maybe she'll let me have a drum set for when I'm old enough to join family operations," Vincenzo looked up hopefully.

"You kids are going to drive your parents to madness!" Dominic shook his head in disbelief. "Carmen, when your parents return from Chicago, I'll speak with your mom about the dog situation."

"No way, Frost! Time has passed and you've done nothing," Carmen objected seriously. "Mom's going to call us soon for the daily check-in, so you can talk to her then and convince her - I want to see some genuine effort from you."

"My God, you're even more persistent than Vincenzo when he wants something!" Dominic gazed at his niece in astonishment.

"We made a deal and you're breaking our agreement," Carmen replied with the conviction of a future family negotiator.

"I'm starting to regret everything about that promise," Dominic lamented dramatically.

"Should I be worried about my own commitments?" I suddenly remembered my own promise to Carmen during our bonding time.

"Are you considering backing out of what you promised me?" Carmen fixed her serious gaze on me with the intensity of a born Frost.

"Absolutely not! The pajama party is happening on Wednesday as planned," I assured her with a smile.

"Then you have nothing to worry about!" Carmen declared triumphantly.

"Pajama party?" Dominic looked at me in confusion. "More matching pajamas and family bonding?"

"Uncle, on Wednesday you'll be wishing we were just wearing matching pajamas!" Vincenzo commented knowingly, causing Dominic to look at me with genuine alarm despite all the dangerous situations he faced in family business.

Chapter 327: Guard Dog Deal

Dominic's POV

The secure living room of my downtown safe house buzzed with comfortable conversation as we discussed plans for an upcoming family gathering when Nadia decided to check in on her children via encrypted video call.

"Hi, Mom! Where are you now?" Carmen's voice rang through the reinforced tablet, her eyes bright with what appeared to be innocence though I had long since learned not to trust those deceptively angelic looks.

"Hi, sweetie! We're in Madrid, waiting for our connection flight. Are you two staying out of trouble?" Nadia looked relaxed and carefree, clearly enjoying her European vacation with Quentin, far from the bloodstained streets of Port Serenity.

Carmen didn't miss a beat. "I always stay out of trouble, Mom. As for Vincenzo..." she threw a sideways glance at her brother, "well, he's a teenage boy in a mafia family. Can't expect miracles." Her tone dripped with sisterly disdain, which made me smile despite the dangerous implications of her words.

"That's completely unfair, Carmen," Vincenzo protested immediately. "Mom, I conduct myself with proper family honor. Always behaving like a future made man should."

Carmen rolled her eyes as Nadia laughed. "That's wonderful. Keep it up so your mother can travel more often without worrying about Thorne family reputation."

My eyebrows shot up. She had barely escaped the family's iron grip and was already planning her next vacation? Before I could comment on the security risks, Nadia requested, "Let me talk to your uncle and Gemma."

Gemma and I took the tablet, exchanging pleasantries with Nadia and Quentin. Throughout our conversation, I felt persistent nudging at my ribs Carmen was getting impatient with our family politics discussion. Deciding to cut to the chase before this sibling rivalry escalated into something requiring family intervention, I interrupted.

"Sis, I need to ask you something important," I said directly, using my Capo voice.

"Go ahead, Dominic." Nadia was only half paying attention as Quentin whispered something in her ear that made her laugh softly, probably some joke about European law enforcement.

"Can I get the kids a guard dog? I'll purchase all equipment and cover all expenses," I blurted out, wanting to get this negotiation over with before any of my men walked in.

Nadia's attention snapped back immediately. "How exactly did Carmen manipulate you into asking me this? Did she use family loyalty or threats?"

I launched into my prepared speech. "Nadia, trained animals help with children's tactical awareness, create responsibility for family assets, reduce operational stress and anxiety, aid in recognizing hostile surveillance, teach focus and discipline..." I had researched this extensively after striking my deal with Carmen, knowing she would collect on her favor eventually. "It would be beneficial for their development as future family members."

"Seriously, Dominic? A rehearsed presentation? That's the best my Capo brother could manage?" Nadia wasn't impressed by my corporate approach to family negotiations.

"Please consider this a personal favor to your brother," I pleaded, knowing Carmen would make my life hell if I failed this simple mission. The kid had more leverage than most of my business associates.

"Dominic, if I allow this, you're going to owe me a significant favor." Her tone made me wince internally. Owing Nadia anything was more dangerous than owing debts to rival families she collected on promises like a loan shark with perfect memory and unlimited patience.

"Agreed, Nadia!" I accepted, feeling like I had just signed away territorial rights to the devil herself. Her satisfied smile confirmed my suspicions.

"Fine. A small dog that won’t compromise operational security, and Carmen handles all maintenance. Before bringing it to my house, take it to our family veterinarian for complete health screening." Nadia laid down her conditions, which I readily accepted, grateful she hadn’t demanded anything involving family business.

"Mom..." Vincenzo began, but Nadia cut him off instantly.

"No, Vincenzo, you cannot have a drum set! Do you want to announce our location to every surveillance operation in the city?" Her maternal instincts remained frighteningly accurate even from overseas.

After some more conversation about travel security and family updates, we ended the encrypted call. Carmen immediately began celebrating around the living room like she had just negotiated a successful territorial expansion.

"Now, uncle, we’re going to find my guard dog!" she declared with absolute certainty, using family terminology.

"I love that plan!" Gemma chimed in, grinning. "Sweetie, you can take us somewhere upscale for lunch first, then we’ll go hunting for Carmen’s new security partner."

"Do I have any input in this family operation?" I asked, already knowing the answer from years of Thorne family dynamics.

I glanced at Vincenzo, who looked disappointed after being denied his drum set. "Let’s move out, everyone. I’ll take you to Vincenzo’s favorite restaurant where we won’t be overheard." His face brightened immediately at the prospect of good food and family time.

At the exclusive restaurant that catered to family business, Vincenzo predictably refused to share his truffle fries, and to my surprise, Gemma followed his lead. I wasn’t sure when this alliance had formed against me, but the three of them had clearly united to make me their primary target. I couldn’t deny I was enjoying myself despite being outnumbered perhaps I was developing masochistic tendencies from years of high stakes negotiations, but the atmosphere felt light and genuine.

"So, Carmen," I said between bites, "since you always seem to know exactly what you want in any deal, let’s be specific what breed are you targeting?"

"I want a mutt," Carmen replied matter of factly, attacking her food with tactical precision.

"A what?" I asked, confused by her unconventional choice.

"A mutt, uncle. A mixed breed rescue." Seeing my bewildered expression, she sighed dramatically. "Uncle, I want to adopt a loyal companion, not purchase merchandise."

"I assumed you’d want some expensive purebred with championship bloodlines," I admitted, genuinely surprised by her decision.

"No. I want a partner, uncle, and you can’t buy true loyalty." Carmen’s answer caught me off guard, as her insights often did. "Besides, there are many animals needing homes. I want to give sanctuary to one that needs protection. And I think treating dogs like expensive objects is wrong."

"You’re actually a tiny adult pretending to be a child, aren’t you?" I asked with mock seriousness, prompting laughter around our table. "Well then, let’s visit a shelter to adopt your new partner, since that’s your preference."

The pure excitement in her dark eyes was worth every bit of trouble this dog would undoubtedly create in our dangerous world.

Chapter 328: Three Dog Takeover

Dominic’s POV

We pulled into the animal shelter parking lot in the armored SUV, and I could immediately see Carmen’s excitement radiating from the backseat. As we walked through the entrance, I instinctively scanned the area for potential threats while watching her expression shift between pure joy and heartbreak at seeing so many abandoned animals. She moved slowly between the kennels, her small fingers reaching through the reinforced bars to pet the eager puppies that rushed forward, desperate for attention.

The place reminded me too much of the holding cells we used for interrogations, but I pushed that thought aside. This was supposed to be a normal family outing, something Gemma had been insisting we needed more of since she'd become part of our circle.

When we reached the last kennel, Carmen stopped abruptly. There, lying alone at the back like a prisoner in solitary confinement, was a massive dog with the saddest eyes I'd ever seen. He had drooping ears and short black fur with a distinctive white patch running from between his eyes down to his snout. One paw was completely white, like he'd stepped in paint.

"Can we go inside?" Carmen asked the caretaker, her voice barely above a whisper. The man hesitated, glancing at me with recognition—probably knew who I was, what family I represented. When I nodded, he opened the gate. Carmen crawled toward the back without any fear, something that both impressed and terrified me. In our world, that kind of trust could get you killed.

The dog watched her approach with his massive head tilted, probably weighing whether this small human was a threat. Carmen gently stroked his fur and leaned in to whisper something in his ear that I couldn't catch. The dog sniffed her cautiously before slowly rising to his feet, towering over her like a bodyguard. When Carmen backed out of the kennel, he followed right behind her, already sworn to protect.

"This is the one, Uncle Dominic!" Carmen declared, wrapping her thin arms around the dog's thick neck. He was enormous compared to her—standing higher than her waist—but incredibly gentle as he licked her face, causing her to burst into delighted giggles. The sound made something tight in my chest loosen. "What's his name?"

"That's Caviar," the shelter worker explained, clearly nervous under my watchful gaze. "He's still young. Been here since birth when his mother's owner couldn't find homes for the litter. Despite his size, he's incredibly gentle. Actually, he's one of our longest residents."

The name was fitting—expensive taste, just like everything else in our family. I felt obligated to point out the obvious issue. "Carmen, your mother specifically asked for a small dog. Caviar is..." I gestured at the beast, but immediately regretted my words when Carmen's eyes welled up with tears that could melt titanium. Even the damn dog seemed to glare at me with disappointment. They had clearly formed an unbreakable bond, the kind you couldn't fake or force.

I sighed, already dreading the phone call with Nadia. She was going to have my head for this. "We'll take Caviar."

Carmen’s face lit up like Christmas morning in a world where Christmas actually meant something pure. I turned around to find Vincenzo and Gemma playing with another large dog—this one with beautiful caramel-colored fur that bounced around like he was high on cocaine.

"Absolutely not," I protested, using my Capo voice. "Your mother will have me sleeping with the fishes if I bring home two dogs."

Gemma approached me with that mischievous smile that always meant trouble, the kind that made hardened soldiers question their loyalty. "You know, handsome, I’ve always dreamed of having a dog of my own."

"Gemma..." I tried to resist, but then she deployed her secret weapon—that slight pout of her perfect lips that could make me agree to burn down city hall if she asked nicely enough.

The caretaker, sensing an opportunity, jumped in like a used car salesman. "This is Amber. He’s been with us for some time after we rescued him from the highway. We estimate he’s still quite young. Very friendly but high-energy."

I looked helplessly at the shelter worker, a man who probably had no idea he was witnessing a Capo being systematically dismantled by his own family. "You can see I don’t have much choice here, right?" The man chuckled knowingly, probably thinking this was just normal family dynamics instead of a complete overthrow of my authority.

"Fine. We’ll adopt both Caviar and Amber."

"So I’m the only one not getting a dog?" Vincenzo complained, looking genuinely wounded by this perceived injustice.

"Do you want your mother to put a hit out on me?" I asked him, only half-joking.

"I wouldn’t mind having a dog," Vincenzo mused, and I was momentarily horrified that I might lose my position as his favorite uncle to a four-legged competitor. "Please, Uncle Dominic, look how small he is. Mom won’t even notice."

"Absolutely not, Vincenzo," I said firmly, trying to channel the authority that made grown men confess their sins.

But then Vincenzo led me to the first kennel where a tiny white furball sat looking up at us with the kind of expression that could guilt a hitman into donating to charity. The creature couldn't have been more than twelve inches tall, with dingy white fur that stuck out in all directions like he'd been electrocuted. His pink tongue hung slightly out of his mouth, giving him an oddly endearing appearance.

"Vincenzo, that might be small now, but it's going to grow into something that requires its own zip code," I warned.

"Actually," the shelter manager interjected, clearly sensing another sale, "Popcorn is fully grown. He's been with us for quite some time. He's very quiet, rarely barks, and quite easygoing."

"Is it just coincidence that all these animals have food names?" I asked, genuinely puzzled by this development.

The manager laughed. "The ones your family chose happen to have food names, but we have all sorts of names here. So, will you be adopting Popcorn too?"

I looked at the three expectant faces around me—both human and canine—and realized I was completely outmaneuvered. In the boardroom, I could negotiate million-dollar laundering operations, but here I was being defeated by puppy-dog eyes and family loyalty.

"Do I really have any choice left? Yes, we'll take all three. But let's move fast before they find more animals to adopt. Nadia is going to murder me in my sleep." The thought made me break into a cold sweat, which only made the shelter worker laugh harder.

"Yaaay!" The chorus of cheers from Gemma, Carmen, and Vincenzo was echoed by excited barks from our new furry family members.

The rest of the day disappeared in a whirlwind of activity that rivaled planning a major operation. First, the veterinarian confirmed all three dogs were healthy, neutered, and had current vaccinations. He recommended specific food brands and care instructions like he was briefing us on sensitive intelligence.

Then we headed to what I naively expected to be a simple pet store but turned out to be more like a luxury boutique for canines. Before long, our new family members were outfitted with leather collars that cost more than most people's monthly rent, matching leashes, an arsenal of toys, and even tiny clothing—complete with bow ties and berets that made them look like miniature wise guys ready for a family meeting.

We loaded the SUV with luxury crates, matching gold-trimmed food and water bowls, and beds that looked more comfortable than most hotel suites. These shelter dogs had definitely hit the jackpot, about to transition from concrete kennels to the kind of lifestyle that most humans could only dream of.

As we drove home through our protected territory, I couldn't help but wonder how exactly I was going to explain to Nadia that her simple request for one small dog had somehow escalated into a full-scale adoption operation involving three animals—two of which definitely qualified as weapons of mass destruction in terms of size.

I was definitely a dead man walking.

Chapter 329: Unexpected Sparks

Gemma's POV

My Sunday afternoon was absolute chaos. Three dogs raced through our heavily secured compound like furry missiles, a giggling little girl chasing after them, a teenager who never stopped talking, a boyfriend whose hands seemed permanently attached to me, and somehow I still needed to prepare lunch for our entire crew.

Juggling all these elements while maintaining our family's reputation for hospitality tested even my multitasking skills.

We'd invited our closest associates over for a poolside gathering at our fortified estate. I'd specifically asked Dominic to include Brenda and her sister Phoebe, and I'd extended an invitation to Zander who,

thankfully, had managed to clear his medical schedule. It promised to be quite the assembly of Thorne family allies.

Xavier and Ruby arrived first in their armored sedan, followed by Caleb and Ivy with Max and their children in their convoy. The noise level instantly doubled as Max became completely enchanted with our guard dogs, rolling around on the manicured lawn with Carmen and the animals within minutes.

"Gemma, three attack dogs? Really?" Ivy surveyed our canine security detail with amused disbelief.

I laughed, adjusting the concealed holster beneath my casual dress. "Some people have babies, others have trained protection. Though technically only Amber belongs to me. The other two are Carmen and Vincenzo's choices."

"Does Nadia know about this expanded security measure?" Zoe appeared behind us with perfect timing, her intelligence operative instincts always sharp.

"She knows about one small dog. But Carmen and Vincenzo have Dominic wrapped around their fingers—they get whatever tactical advantage they want," I explained with a sigh.

Zoe's eyes gleamed with anticipation. "I can't wait to see Nadia tear him apart when she returns from her European business trip!"

Soon our compound was bustling with family—we were just waiting on Brenda, Phoebe, and Zander to complete our inner circle. The men gravitated toward the outdoor kitchen with drinks while the women requested a tour of our secured residence, which I happily provided.

"Now you just need to fill this fortress with little soldiers!" Ivy remarked as we finished surveying our defensive positions.

"Not so fast, Ivy!" I grinned. "I'm perfectly content borrowing your little warriors for now."

We returned to the terrace just as Vincenzo arrived with Brenda and Phoebe under escort. I hurried over to greet them, noting how our security protocols had relaxed everyone into the family atmosphere.

"Girls! How wonderful to have you in our home!" I embraced them warmly before introducing them to our assembled crew.

Once we settled around the reinforced table near our secured pool area, Brenda spoke up, her voice gentle but concerned. "Gemma, could you maybe offer some guidance to my stubborn sister?"

"What's the situation, Phoebe?" I turned my attention to her, immediately recognizing the haunted expression I'd seen too often in our world.

Phoebe sighed heavily. "It's Hunter. I let myself fall for him again, and he destroyed me. Again."

"Wait, Hunter from Xavier's crew?" Ruby interjected, her face darkening.

"The same one," I confirmed, watching Ruby's expression turn murderous. "What did he do this time, Phoebe?"

"After you two ended things, he contacted me," Phoebe explained, staring at her hands. "We went out several times, and I got swept away. Then we ran into each other at a family gathering—one he'd deliberately kept me from—and he acted like he'd never seen me before. He was there with another woman from a rival family."

"What a complete waste of oxygen!" Ruby snarled.

"The worst part? He called the next day acting normal, wanting to meet up. When I confronted him, he had the audacity to say we weren't exclusive, were just 'having fun,' and he could associate with whoever he wanted without explanations." Phoebe blinked back tears.

"What an absolute piece of garbage!" Zoe's eyes flashed with lethal intent.

"I ended it immediately. Told him this arrangement wasn't acceptable and to stay away from me. But it still hurts," Phoebe admitted.

Zoe leaned forward, determination radiating from her like heat. "You know what you need? A man who actually values you! We're going to teach you some things. Stay close to us, and you'll see results!"

"And there she goes—Phoebe just became Zoe's new mission," Ivy laughed knowingly.

"Don't worry, Phoebe," Lila reassured her with a gentle touch. "I was her last project—completely hopeless—but look at me now! She performs miracles."

"ZANDER!" Dominic's commanding voice announced our final arrival.

"Zander?" the women asked in unison, curiosity evident.

"Zander is my stepfather's son from his previous marriage. We grew up like siblings," I explained. "Somehow, he and Dominic became childhood allies and treat each other like blood brothers."

"Wow, Gemma, he's absolutely stunning!" Nora commented appreciatively.

"He is. Handsome, honorable, and a trauma surgeon. I always say Zander is practically flawless," I replied, watching him approach our protected gathering.

"Sweet mother of God! Are all the world's most dangerous women assembled here today? Why didn't you warn me, Beautiful?" Zander greeted us with his characteristic charm, his medical bag discretely positioned for any emergency.

"I was protecting you from them—they're all claimed. Didn't want them abandoning their men for you," I teased.

"Not all of us are claimed," Zoe interjected with a predatory grin, gesturing toward Phoebe. "Phoebe's completely available."

Zander’s gaze shifted from me to Phoebe, and I noticed something change in his expression—a spark of genuine interest I hadn’t seen before.

"Allow me to introduce myself properly." Zander moved toward her with the confidence of someone accustomed to life-or-death situations, extending his hand. Phoebe took it with shy hesitation. "I’m Zander. The honor is entirely mine, Phoebe." He brought her hand to his lips, causing her cheeks to flush.

"The honor is mine, Zander," Phoebe responded, uncharacteristically timid.

They connected immediately. Zander gave her his complete attention, and soon they were laughing like longtime confidants. When evening approached, Zander offered to escort Phoebe and Brenda home in his secured vehicle, and they departed together under our watchful protection.

"Auntie," Vincenzo settled beside me on the couch after everyone had been safely escorted out.

"What’s on your mind, Vincenzo?" I rested my head on his shoulder, exhausted but satisfied with our successful gathering.

"I know you’ve mentioned Zander is nearly perfect and all that, but I noticed how focused he was on Phoebe," Vincenzo began cautiously.

"I noticed that too," I admitted with a small sigh.

"I think he’s genuinely honorable."

"I think so too."

"But Phoebe’s incredible. She’s my girlfriend’s sister. I worry about her, especially after what that snake Hunter did."

"Don’t even mention him. Hunter was absolutely toxic to her."

"So I'd hate for her to experience something like that again."

"I understand completely. Listen, Vincenzo, Zander is exceptional and would never manipulate Phoebe if something develops between them. He's marriage material—he doesn't deceive, doesn't play games, doesn't engage casually, and he's always direct and honest," I assured him, feeling his shoulders relax.

"That's reassuring! If that's true, I'm rooting for them. Phoebe's wonderful, but she's such a romantic—believes in perfect love stories. Zander seems like the closest thing to that ideal," Vincenzo said thoughtfully.

"You're quite the gentleman yourself, Vincenzo! I see how respectfully you treat people and how your face lights up when you look at Brenda," I pointed out, making him smile.

"I really care about her, Auntie. But she's my first serious relationship, I'm her first boyfriend... I don't know..."

"Out with it, kid!" I knew something was troubling him.

"Do you think it could last forever? Could she be the love of my life?"

"What does your heart tell you?" I countered.

"I want her to be."

"Then let time provide that answer. As long as it feels right and she continues to be special to you, just let things develop naturally. You're both young, but plenty of couples start dating as teenagers and stay together for life," I reassured him, and he nodded in agreement.

I found Vincenzo's youthful uncertainties and discoveries endearing. It brought me joy to be part of his journey—he was definitely growing into an exceptional young man.

Chapter 330: Street Confrontation Erupts

Dominic’s POV

"Good morning, household!" I strode into the kitchen Monday morning, feeling particularly satisfied after reviewing the weekend’s laundering reports. My entrance was met with warm laughter and a chorus of greetings that filled our heavily secured penthouse with positive energy.

"Kids, hurry up and brush those teeth. We can’t have you late for school," Gemma urged Carmen and Vincenzo, who were still finishing their breakfast under the watchful eyes of our armed security detail stationed discreetly throughout the residence.

Brandon, our head of personal security, placed his empty coffee cup in the sink and headed toward the door with his usual alert demeanor. "I’ll be conducting the perimeter sweep, children," he announced as Maia, one of our trained female bodyguards, followed him out to prepare the armored vehicles.

I couldn’t resist wrapping my arms around Gemma from behind. "Good morning, Songbird," I whispered, planting a lingering kiss on her lips that made my blood surge with the same intensity I felt during high-stakes territory negotiations.

She returned my embrace, her arms circling my neck as she whispered seductively in my ear, "Good morning, my dangerous man. We have the fortress all to ourselves this morning."

My excitement surged instantly. "I’ll get these kids moving at record speed," I promised, but Gemma pulled me toward the reinforced steel table, insisting I sit down for breakfast first.

Carmen and Vincenzo finished their morning routine in a flurry, shouting barely comprehensible goodbyes as they dashed out the door surrounded by their security escort. Everything felt perfect in our controlled domain, and I couldn’t wait to have some quality alone time with my queen.

We had just settled in the bulletproof living room, discussing our plans for managing the week’s operations with the children, when the encrypted doorbell interrupted our conversation. Gemma went to check the security monitor, and in waltzed Xavier as if he owned half the Thorne territory.

"Good morning, power couple!" he announced, throwing himself onto the Italian leather couch. He was dressed casually today but still carried his signature concealed weapons and radiated his usual lethal confidence.

I frowned slightly. "Don't you have collections to oversee?" I asked, already sensing that my plans for alone time with Gemma were evaporating like smoke from a rival's burning warehouse.

"Well, you and Gemma extended your operational break, and I thought that was a brilliant strategy. So I delegated my street work too. My redhead is handling some enforcement business though, and I was restless as hell alone at my compound. Figured I'd come strategize with you two instead," Xavier explained with infuriating calmness.

"And you thought that was a good tactical decision?" I questioned, noticing Gemma laughing as she sat beside me, her hand instinctively checking the concealed blade at her thigh.

"Absolutely! Nothing better than coordination time with fellow soldiers," Xavier replied with a broad smile, throwing a wink at Gemma. "But I actually came to summon you both to Caleb's. He's also suspended his direct oversight operations."

"Do I even have a choice in this chain of command?" I asked, feeling my irritation rise like the temperature in our private interrogation room.

"None whatsoever!" Xavier's grin widened impossibly further, his hand resting casually on his holstered weapon.

I sighed dramatically. "Fine. I'm going to change into proper meeting attire." I headed upstairs, muttering tactical curses under my breath.

A short while later, we arrived at Caleb's heavily fortified compound. He greeted us with an unexpectedly serious expression that immediately triggered my combat instincts and put me on high alert.

"I thought Ivy would've improved your disposition by now, Caleb," I teased, trying to assess the threat level in the atmosphere.

"She did, but you two are driving me to consider extreme measures," Caleb replied, fixing Xavier and me with the stern look he usually reserved for territorial negotiations. I realized this wasn't a casual strategy session.

"What's the situation report?" I demanded, my patience evaporating like blood on concrete.

Xavier answered with military precision, "Elza and Beatrix."

I felt a familiar headache building, the same one I got before ordering eliminations. "What are those targets plotting now?"

"That's just it—we don't have solid intelligence, but they're definitely coordinating some kind of operation against us," Xavier explained, his voice taking on the edge he used during hostile territory briefings. "Elza cornered me at the underground club on Saturday. Thank god Ruby wasn't conducting surveillance there."

"What happened? Give me a complete tactical report, Xavier," I pressed, anxiety building like pressure in a weapon's chamber.

"She trapped me in the restricted locker area and initiated aggressive contact—really aggressive. We had words, and I barely extracted myself from the situation. But she made it strategically clear that she and Beatrix aren't going to repeat the tactical errors Yara made. They're planning a coordinated assault to separate us from our women." Xavier's voice carried the tension of someone who'd narrowly escaped enemy territory.

"Did you brief Ruby on this incident?" I asked, though I already knew the answer from his defensive posture.

"Of course not! Ruby would initiate lethal protocols if she discovered I was isolated in a restricted area with that unstable operative while she was unclothed." Xavier ran his hands through his hair with the nervous energy of someone avoiding friendly fire.

"You need to provide her with full disclosure, Xavier. If she receives even fragmentary intelligence about this from any other source, the consequences will be far more severe," I warned with the authority of someone who'd survived similar relationship warfare.

"Maybe you're strategically correct," he conceded. "But we need to neutralize those targets, and fast!"

Caleb joined our tactical discussion, "We need to identify their operational weaknesses. I only managed to eliminate Yara as a threat when Xavier uncovered her compromising alliance with Austin."

Xavier and I exchanged knowing glances that carried the weight of shared combat experience. "Austin might possess useful intelligence," I suggested.

Xavier nodded with military efficiency. "Confirmed. I'll establish contact and conduct reconnaissance. After we exposed Yara's betrayal, he underwent significant behavioral modifications. We maintain almost cooperative relations now."

"Solid operational plan. Maintain communication protocols," I said, standing to extract myself from the meeting.

"Where are you deploying?" Caleb asked.

"Back to my goddess while the young ones are still securing their educational positions," I replied with a smile, heading out through the compound's sophisticated security systems.

I was nearly within my home territory when I felt someone execute an ambush grab from behind—Beatrix had successfully infiltrated our neighborhood perimeter.

"Baby! How could you relocate your operations without briefing me? I demand reconnaissance of your new stronghold. After all, that's where we'll establish our power base after we're united in marriage, right?" she proclaimed loudly enough for the entire civilian population to hear.

"Have you suffered complete mental breakdown, Beatrix? Release me immediately!" I struggled to break free, but she clung to me like a professional interrogator—the more I fought, the tighter she maintained her tactical grip.

I was completely stunned by this breach of our territorial security. If Gemma witnessed this compromising position, I'd face serious internal conflict. Xavier was strategically correct about neutralizing these threats, but I couldn't even break her operational hold.

Suddenly, Beatrix released a pained shriek that echoed through the neighborhood, and her grip loosened. After regaining my tactical balance, I turned to see Gemma yanking Beatrix's hair with the fierce determination of someone executing a perfectly planned counter-assault. The situation would have been tactically amusing if it weren't such a complete security disaster.

"You picked the wrong day to breach my territory, you home-invading enemy operative!" Gemma yelled, maintaining her strategic grip as Beatrix tried desperately to break free from what was clearly superior combat training. "I'm going to teach you to respect other women's claimed assets!"

I quickly grabbed my encrypted phone and sent an emergency tactical message to Xavier requesting immediate backup with Caleb. I stood frozen, calculating whether to separate the combatants or allow Gemma to deliver the punishment this territorial violation clearly warranted.