Mafia Mask 331

Chapter 331: Warehouse Showdown

Dominic’s POV

I barely registered the black SUV pulling up to the Thorne family warehouse district or the women stepping out in formation. Zoe, my most ruthless intelligence operative, arrived already savoring the carnage unfolding before us like she was watching her favorite execution.

"That’s it, Gemma! Show that snake she picked the wrong Capo’s woman to mess with!" Zoe called out, her eyes gleaming with the kind of satisfaction she usually reserved for interrogations gone right.

"Zoe, for Christ’s sake, help me separate them," I pleaded desperately, completely out of my element. In all my years running the family’s money laundering operations, I’d never felt this helpless.

She shot me a look that could have frozen blood. "Don’t you dare interfere, Frost! Let Gemma purge this poison from our territory." Then she cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted like she was calling hits at a street execution, "Gemma! Grind that treacherous face right into the asphalt!"

"Zoe!" I barked, but the damage was already done.

Gemma had Beatrix pinned face-first against the rough concrete of the warehouse loading dock, one fist twisted in her hair while her knee pressed firmly between Beatrix’s shoulder blades. Beatrix was completely immobilized, her screams for mercy echoing through the industrial complex. The cold determination in Gemma’s dark eyes was the same look I’d seen on veteran soldiers before they pulled triggers.

"Listen carefully, you backstabbing parasite," Gemma hissed directly into Beatrix’s ear, loud enough for everyone in our circle to hear. "Don’t ever show your face in Dominic’s territory again."

"Let me go! You’re breaking my ribs, you psychotic bitch!" Beatrix wailed, tears streaming down her face as she tasted concrete and her own blood.

I spotted Xavier and Caleb rushing toward the scene from the warehouse entrance, but they were quickly intercepted by Ivy and Ruby, who had arrived with Zoe and now formed a human wall with the efficiency of trained bodyguards.

"Finish her, Gemma! Break that lying whore's nose!" Zoe hollered gleefully, sounding like she was placing bets at an underground fighting ring. She turned to me with a predatory grin. "Actually, I think I'll lend a hand." Before I could react, she thrust her Hermès bag into my hands and kicked off her designer heels like she was preparing for a hit.

"Melissa..." I watched in horror as my lieutenant joined the street brawl.

Zoe crouched down beside the struggling women and grabbed Beatrix's arm, twisting it behind her back with the precision of someone who'd learned anatomy for all the wrong reasons.

"LET ME GOOO... I DIDN'T BETRAY ANYONE," Beatrix shrieked, her voice raw with terror and pain.

"Don't play innocent with us," Gemma growled, applying more pressure. "Everyone in this family knows exactly what you've been feeding to our enemies."

Zoe leaned in close to Beatrix's ear, her voice dropping to the deadly whisper she used during family interrogations. "The last woman who tried to play both sides of a territory war had to flee to South America for reconstructive surgery..." Her tone was eerily calm as she applied calculated pressure to Beatrix's arm joint.

"For the love of all that's holy, someone help me separate these three before we all end up in federal custody!" I was already envisioning spending many years in maximum security.

"Don't worry about legal complications, Dominic," Lila called from her position near the warehouse entrance. "If anything goes sideways, Daniel will handle it. The department owes Gemma protection after that mess with Nick."

"Get these lunatics off me!" Beatrix pleaded through sobs, her voice breaking.

"Lunatic, am I?" Zoe laughed with the dark humor of someone who'd seen too many bodies drop. "Oh yes, I am. You're lucky I'm feeling merciful today."

"But unfortunately for you, sweetheart," Gemma added, tightening her grip on Beatrix's hair with surgical precision, "I'm feeling exactly the opposite of merciful!"

That's when I spotted Daniel arriving with Finn, both men moving with the measured urgency of law enforcement who'd seen worse. I wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or terrified. At this rate, Gemma and Zoe were definitely heading for a very uncomfortable conversation with Internal Affairs.

"Holy hell! What kind of war zone did I walk into?" Daniel stared at the chaotic scene, his detective instincts warring with his family loyalty. "I was called in for a security consultation, not to break up a street execution!"

"Daniel, help me out here. I have no idea how to handle this without starting a blood feud," I pleaded, completely overwhelmed by the violence of the women in my life.

"Damn, Dominic! First priority is getting these wildcats off the informant!" Though I detected a hint of professional admiration in Daniel's tone. "Finn, take the intelligence operative. Jude, you secure the target."

With the practiced coordination of men who'd broken up countless family disputes, Daniel restrained Gemma while Finn tackled Zoe. They lifted both women bodily off Beatrix, though they continued thrashing with lethal intent, limbs striking air where flesh had been moments before.

"Let me go, detective!" Gemma yelled with the fury of a woman defending her territory. "I'm not finished with this treacherous snake! There won't be a single strand of hair left on that empty skull!"

"You tell her, Gemma!" Zoe shouted encouragement like she was coaching a prizefighter. "We don't leave loose ends for the competition to exploit!"

"You're all criminally insane!" Beatrix screamed as Jude secured her by the waist with professional efficiency. "Violent, classless, dangerous women!"

"Oh really?" Gemma's voice dripped with the kind of sarcasm that preceded permanent solutions. "So if I ask politely, will you disappear from this city forever? I'm warning you—stay away from Dominic's operations."

"Jude, put the liability in my patrol car," Daniel instructed before walking Gemma over to me with the careful handling of volatile explosives. "Gemma, you're incredible. I can barely contain you when you're like this."

"Nobody asked you to contain me, Daniel," Gemma grumbled as I took her from his professional grip.

"I'm taking this woman outside family territory and making sure she doesn't file any reports that could complicate our operations," Daniel announced before climbing into his unmarked vehicle.

After Daniel drove Beatrix away from our warehouse district, we all retreated to the safe house. Gemma was still radiating lethal energy and perspiring from the fight, but once we reached the secured living room, she and Zoe exchanged glances—and suddenly burst into uncontrollable laughter. Within seconds, all the women were doubled over laughing while we men watched in bewildered silence, wondering what the hell we'd signed up for.

"You ladies are absolutely terrifying," Caleb remarked, though his eyes sparkled with the kind of admiration reserved for successful operations.

Soon Daniel and Finn returned to debrief. Daniel assured us that Beatrix wouldn't be pressing charges or filing any reports that could threaten family operations.

"Just to clarify, Gemma," Jude asked, recalling an incident from some time ago, "that day you had that confrontation with Monica at the front office—you let her strike first on purpose, right?"

"Obviously, Jude," Gemma replied with the strategic pride of a born tactician. "I never let disrespect slide, but that day it was necessary to maintain our legal position."

"You magnificent warrior!" Daniel was laughing with genuine respect. "Watching you demolish that backstabbing princess was the most entertaining thing I've witnessed in years of police work!"

"Daniel, stop encouraging her!" Finn scolded with the weariness of a man who'd seen too much violence. "Zoe already seeks out enough trouble through official channels!"

"It's not trouble, prince," Zoe retorted with the confidence of someone who controlled information networks. "It's about demanding the respect this family deserves."

"Honestly, I'm exhausted by this pattern," Gemma complained, settling into my arms. "Everywhere we establish operations, this woman appears thinking she can throw herself at you, Dominic!"

"Good thing I have you to protect family interests," I smiled, pulling her closer and realizing I'd never felt safer in my life.

We continued debriefing and decided to order secure catering. Soon Vincenzo and Carmen arrived home from their private academy, and after a late lunch, we moved to the entertainment room. Vincenzo suggested starting a video game tournament—an idea everyone enthusiastically supported. We were in for an extended session of competitive fun, the kind of normal family time that made all the violence worthwhile.

Chapter 332: Designer Shoe Disaster

Gemma's POV

We had barely started our gaming session when Daniel received an encrypted call that pulled him away with terse mentions of Thorne family business, promising to return after handling some cleanup work. Lila sat quietly observing while the rest of us continued playing without interruption.

Everything was progressing smoothly until Maia's call disrupted my concentration.

"Gemma, your moving boxes from the old apartment have arrived at the safe house. I'm planning to organize everything—do you have any specific instructions for me?" Maia asked. I felt a wave of relief wash over me, grateful I wouldn't need to visit that compromised location myself—especially after that disturbing threat letter.

"No special instructions, Maia. They're just clothes and personal items—you can leave everything in the walk-in closet. I really appreciate your help with this," I replied, genuinely thankful for her assistance in maintaining operational security.

"One more thing," Maia added. "Zander asked me to give you this." She handed over an envelope that immediately sent tremors through my body.

Another letter so soon? Impossible. I stood frozen, staring at the envelope as if it might explode in my hands. Suddenly, I felt a reassuring touch on my shoulder as the envelope disappeared from my grip.

"I'll handle this, Claire," Dominic said from behind me, his voice carrying that dangerous edge reserved for family threats. "Don't let it poison your day."

But the damage was done—my peace of mind had already shattered. I reclaimed the letter from Dominic's hands and tore it open, unable to bear the suspense any longer. The contents were predictably menacing—more threats from Nick claiming he'd secured protection from rival crews and would be released soon to settle scores.

I needed to contact our family lawyer immediately to get intelligence on Nick's potential release timeline. He'd been locked up for quite some time already—how much longer did our protective custody last?

"I'll call the family attorney tomorrow," I sighed, surrendering the letter to Dominic.

"You alright?" he asked, his arm circling my waist as concern darkened his emerald eyes.

"I am. I told you—I feel safe in Thorne territory," I assured him, pressing a quick kiss to his lips.

When Daniel finally returned hours later, Lila had already claimed the gaming championship title. Dominic pulled Daniel aside to show him the newly arrived threat. While Vincenzo captivated everyone with another of his elaborate adventure stories, I discreetly motioned for Lila to join me.

"What's troubling you?" Lila questioned when we reached the privacy of the secure living room.

"I should be asking you that—why the worried expression?"

"Daniel's still acting strangely. Did you notice how he rushed out earlier for that Thorne business?"

"You need to confront him directly, Lila."

"Maybe I should..."

After our friends departed and the children were secured for the night, exhaustion washed over me. What I had hoped would be a peaceful Monday had transformed into an emotionally draining day. I had just settled comfortably under the reinforced covers when Dominic's panicked voice shattered the silence.

"CLAIRE!" he shouted from the walk-in closet, desperation evident in his tone.

"What could possibly warrant such a reaction?" I wondered, dragging myself reluctantly from bed.

I found Dominic crouched on the marble closet floor, holding a pair of black Italian leather shoes with an expression of absolute horror. He thrust them toward me as I entered.

"What is it, Dominic? I was already in bed. You summoned me in here just to examine shoes?" I complained.

"Gemma, look inside the shoe." His voice tightened with rising fury.

I leaned forward to inspect the interior and immediately identified the source of his distress. I struggled mightily to contain my laughter.

"Dominic, just leave them in the cleaning room. I'll have your precious shoes professionally restored tomorrow," I said, fighting for composure.

"I want to know who committed this crime! These are custom Italian leather, Gemma—handmade by artisans—and now they're desecrated!" Dominic fumed.

"Dominic, they're just shoes!" The moment those words left my mouth, his expression darkened. He bent down, seized one of my beautiful red designer shoes—ones I'd purchased recently and hadn't even worn yet—and held it up to reveal the same offensive contents. My blood instantly boiled.

"POPCORN! ROSE!" My shout reverberated throughout the safe house.

Within seconds, Popcorn and Rose appeared in the bedroom doorway, accompanied by the furry culprits. We migrated to the secured living room where Dominic initiated what felt like a family tribunal.

"Which one of you is going to explain this vandalism?" Dominic pointed accusingly at the violated footwear. The children exchanged glances, examined the shoes, then looked back at each other.

"I can't explain it, Uncle Dominic, but I know it wasn't me," Popcorn attempted humor, but I crouched to meet his gaze directly.

"Do you think this is amusing, Popcorn? Do you have any idea how long it took me to select these shoes? I hadn't even broken them in yet!" My anger flared. I could tolerate many things in this dangerous life, but my shoes were sacred territory.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Gemma. But it was them." Popcorn pointed to the dogs sitting obediently on the Persian carpet.

"Really, Popcorn?" Dominic's irritation matched my own. "How exactly did this happen? Don't try to be clever about it."

"We got a bit careless today during the gathering—I admit it. The safe house was full of people and we lost track of our responsibilities," Popcorn defended weakly.

"This is precisely why your mother didn't want pets in the safe house properties," Dominic grumbled.

"You all got distracted and now our shoes have become a canine toilet facility. Look at this—they managed to deposit number two directly inside the shoes!" I complained.

Popcorn picked up the shoes, examined them closely, and burst into laughter.

"Popcorn, how did you manage to aim number two with such precision right inside the shoes?" he asked with misplaced admiration. "Leave it to me, Aunt Gemma. I know a place that cleans, disinfects, and makes everything smell fresh again."

"Kid, don't you know genuine leather shoes can't get waterlogged?" Dominic challenged. "They're ruined."

"My father takes his shoes to this establishment, Uncle Dominic. They're not destroyed. They have specialized techniques for cleaning without damaging the leather integrity." Popcorn spoke with absolute confidence.

"Whatever—deal with this tomorrow. I'm going to bed, and if I catch any of these furry criminals in my room, I'll turn them into street food." Dominic threatened before stomping off to bed.

We awoke the next morning barely able to breathe. Our king-sized bed had somehow accumulated multiple bodies overnight—Rose wedged between Dominic and me, Popcorn sprawled across the foot of the bed, and all the dogs piled on top of us like furry blankets. Popcorn, the most audacious of the trio, had settled directly on Dominic's chest. When Dominic awoke and registered the furry weight pressing against his ribs, he leaped from the bed in shock, nearly launching the poor dog against the reinforced wall in his startled panic.

Chapter 333: Behind Bars Plotting

Nick's POV

Months had rotted away since they locked me up in this concrete hellhole. All because some corrupt judge decided to side with that bitch Gemma and convict me of breaking and entering after I tried to get what was rightfully mine from her apartment. One moment of bad timing cost me my clean record and my freedom. My court-appointed attorney kept reminding me that Gemma had Thorne family lawyers

working the case - those bloodsucking legal sharks who served the mafia families downtown. They made sure I got the maximum sentence.

Those damn love letters I'd been sending her from inside kept getting intercepted by the guards and used against me in appeals. The warden made it clear that my correspondence was being monitored, making it nearly impossible to reach her the way I needed to. I had to find another way to get a cell phone, though contraband like that cost serious money behind bars. Gi would help me though - she'd proven her loyalty since the day I arrived.

Shortly after my incarceration, I'd met Stevie, a wiry con man who quickly became my closest ally in this cage. He explained that surviving on the inside meant having reliable people working for you on the outside. Having no family worth trusting, I was grateful when he introduced me to his sister Gi during visiting hours. She turned out to be everything I needed - handling my requests without asking questions, smuggling in small favors, and never missing a single visitation day. Speaking of which, here she came now, her heels clicking across the worn linoleum.

"I'm here, baby!" Gi called out, her throaty laughter echoing through the visiting room as she tossed her bleached hair over her leather jacket. Everything about her screamed street tough - the kind of woman who could navigate both sides of the law.

"My beautiful Gi! How's my girl doing out there?" I greeted her with the most passionate kiss the guards would allow. She was attractive in a dangerous way, and we'd developed quite the understanding during our months of correspondence.

"When you start with that sweet talk, I know you need something heavy," she said with a knowing smirk, her dark eyes studying my face. "Just spit it out, Nick. We both know this isn't a social call."

"That useless public defender they stuck me with showed up this week," I confided, leaning closer across the metal table.

"Oh yeah? What did that spineless piece of garbage have to say this time?"

"Says I need to stop sending letters to Gemma - claims it's screwing up my chances for early release. According to him, if I want him to negotiate a plea reduction, I need to keep my mouth shut and play the reformed convict."

"And what's your real plan?" she asked, her voice dropping to a whisper that wouldn't carry to the guards stationed around the room.

"I need a burner phone. I know which guards can be bought and how the system works in here, but the phones don't come cheap. Can you front me the cash for that kind of purchase?"

"That depends entirely on something else. My brother Stevie wanted me to confirm that your business arrangement with him is still solid. He's counting on your release, so maybe laying low with those letters actually makes sense. Save your real revenge for when you're back on the streets where you can handle things properly." Gi's suggestion had merit, but the thought of Gemma living peacefully while I rotted in here made my blood boil.

Stevie's brother ran a mid-level drug operation out of the old warehouse district - nothing that would attract Thorne family attention, but profitable enough to need professional financial management. He needed someone with accounting skills to clean his money and manage his books, and with my business degree, he wanted me running his finances the moment I walked free. The offer was tempting since I'd been blacklisted from legitimate employment anyway, and his compensation package was more than generous.

"Tell Stevie it's a done deal! The second I'm released, I'll head straight to his operation and take over everything financial. He won't have to worry about the IRS or rival crews tracking his cash flow," I assured her, knowing this partnership would give me the resources I needed for bigger plans.

"Perfect! Then we can definitely arrange your phone situation. Give me the specifics of what model you need and which guard you're planning to work with, and you'll have it soon. Just don't get careless and let them find it during shakedowns, or you can kiss early parole goodbye. That would seriously mess up Stevie's timeline for expansion," she warned.

"Don't worry about that - I've already arranged for one of the trustees to take the fall if anything gets discovered during cell searches. I've got this whole thing mapped out," I explained, feeling proud of how I'd learned to work the prison system.

"Look at you, getting smart about how things work in here! I'm impressed with this new strategic side of you. Now, let me fill you in on some concerns Stevie has about territorial disputes with the Dominican crews. He wants your opinion on whether it's worth the risk to expand into their neighborhood..."

Gi proved her reliability better than I'd even hoped - shortly after our visit, I had a working smartphone hidden in my mattress. As I'd expected, that Thorne family whore Gemma had changed her number, so I had Gi start working her street contacts to track down the new information. I had complete confidence in Gi's network; she had connections throughout the city's underworld who could find anyone.

All I needed now was patience and careful planning. Soon I would make Gemma's life a living nightmare until she regretted the day she chose those mafia bastards over me.

The guards thought these concrete walls could contain my rage, but they had no idea what was coming for her.

Chapter 334: Dreams Take Shape

Dominic's POV

The private Thorne family club sat nestled in the hills overlooking Port Serenity, its marble terraces gleaming in the morning sun as I arrived for my scheduled meeting with Xavier. We hadn't sparred in the underground training facility in months, and I was looking forward to reconnecting with my old friend outside the constant pressures of family business. Finding a comfortable spot on the observation deck, I settled in to wait, letting the warmth of the day ease some of the tension that never fully left my shoulders.

My attention drifted to the pool area below, where a father was playing with his young son in the crystal-clear water. The boy couldn't have been more than a toddler, splashing excitedly while his father pretended to be some fearsome sea creature from the depths. Their laughter echoed across the stone deck, pure and unguarded in a way that seemed almost foreign in our world of constant vigilance and measured words.

Something about their interaction stirred an unexpected longing deep in my chest - a desire that had been growing stronger with each passing day since Vincenzo and Carmen had been staying with us. The way Gemma's face lit up when she helped them with homework, how naturally she'd fallen into the rhythm of family life, it had awakened something in me I'd never seriously contemplated before.

For some time now, I'd been wrestling with thoughts that would have seemed impossible not so long ago. But how could I bring such a conversation up with Gemma? Would she even want the same future I was beginning to envision?

"Dominic! It's been far too long, darling."

The sickeningly sweet voice cut through my contemplation like a blade. Standing beside me in a designer dress that left little to the imagination was Nancy - tall, artificially enhanced, with the kind of calculated beauty that once might have impressed me. Years had passed since I'd last been forced to endure her presence, and I'd hoped our paths would never cross again.

"Nancy," I replied coolly, remaining seated and making no move to acknowledge her properly. "It has been a long time."

She pouted with practiced theatricality, the expression she'd perfected to manipulate weaker men. "Don't I deserve at least a proper greeting? A kiss hello?"

Looking up at her, I didn't bother masking my disgust. She maintained her physical appeal, certainly, but I knew the poisonous nature that lurked beneath that carefully crafted exterior. "No. You don't."

"Oh, come now, Dominic. You used to worship my kisses," she purred, leaning toward me with the kind of calculated seduction she'd once wielded like a weapon.

Standing abruptly, I put several feet of distance between us, my hand instinctively moving toward the concealed weapon at my side. "You're referring to a time when I was a foolish young man, ruled by base instincts and easily manipulated. I'm not that naive boy anymore." I turned to leave without bothering with further pleasantries.

"I seriously doubt you've forgotten me completely!" Her laughter was sharp as glass against my spine. "Especially considering you're still unmarried and, from what I've heard through certain circles, you've never had another serious relationship."

I pivoted slowly, facing her with the kind of cold contempt I usually reserved for family enemies. "Your sources are remarkably unreliable. I have a beautiful woman who shares my home and my life."

Moving closer, I allowed myself a moment of fierce pride. "You see, Nancy, I chose to wait patiently for the right woman to appear in my life, and she did - like an angel descended from heaven itself. Meanwhile, I built an empire, transformed my father's failing operations into a technological powerhouse that spans the entire eastern seaboard. I was patient, persistent, and loyal. You, on the other hand, appear to have become nothing more than an expensive ornament for whichever man can afford your services this week."

Her perfectly manicured hand flew toward my face in a rage, but I caught her wrist mid-air with the reflexes that had kept me alive in this business. Our eyes locked as I applied just enough pressure to make my point crystal clear - never again would she dare to touch me. I released her and walked away toward the training facilities.

"We'll see if you've truly forgotten me, Dominic," she called after me, but her words dissolved into the morning air behind me like the empty threats they were.

Xavier found me brooding in the equipment room, methodically checking the clips on my shoulder holsters. "Don't tell me you're already growing tired of domestic bliss?" he teased, his familiar grin breaking through the dark cloud that had settled over my mood.

"Brother, the most surprising part is that I never imagined I'd enjoy family life as much as I do. I don't even want to give my sister's children back when she returns!" I admitted, greeting him with our usual firm handshake.

He raised an eyebrow with genuine curiosity. "Then why do you look like someone just insulted your bloodline?"

"You won't believe who just had the audacity to approach me."

"Who dared?" Xavier's expression immediately shifted to something more dangerous, the easy humor replaced by the cold calculation of a family consigliere.

I sighed heavily, running a hand through my hair. "Let's skip combat training today and find somewhere private to drink. I need to talk through some things."

"Should I call Caleb and the others?"

"Not necessary. It’s nothing that requires family intervention, just thoughts that won’t stop circling in my head, and I need to voice them to someone I trust."

"Don’t you discuss everything with Gemma?" he asked as we made our way toward the private bar area.

"This particular subject might terrify her," I replied with a rueful half-smile.

Settled at a secluded corner table with glasses of our finest whiskey, I gathered my scattered thoughts while Xavier waited with the patience of a man accustomed to extracting confessions and secrets.

"Start by identifying who had the nerve to disturb your peace," he prompted, genuine curiosity evident in his dark eyes.

"Nancy," I stated flatly.

Xavier’s eyes widened with a mixture of surprise and disgust. "Nancy? The same parasitic witch who..."

"The very one who abandoned me for my father’s money and convinced him to divorce my mother," I confirmed grimly.

"What does that vulture want, crawling out of whatever hole she’s been hiding in? That woman never makes a move without a calculated agenda," Xavier muttered, shaking his head with obvious distaste.

"She was clearly attempting to seduce me back into her web. I suspect she’s hunting for a new wealthy fool to bankroll her lifestyle."

"She has some serious nerve showing her face here!" Xavier exclaimed, his voice carrying the edge that made him so effective in family negotiations. "I’m telling you, what were we thinking in our youth - you,

Caleb, and myself? We seemed magnetically drawn to the most toxic women possible, and now they're all crawling back like roaches."

I nodded grimly. "Exactly my thoughts. I just pray that opportunistic predator keeps her distance from Gemma and understood clearly that she has absolutely no chance of reclaiming any piece of my life."

"I'm not sure a simple rejection will be enough to discourage someone like her, but we can hope. However, I don't think that encounter is what's really weighing on your mind."

I hesitated, then took a steadying drink before admitting, "No, it's not the primary concern. Actually, these past weeks with Vincenzo and Carmen staying in our home have me thinking constantly about building a real family."

Xavier nearly choked on his whiskey. "Madonna mia! That's incredible! You, who always swore you'd never bring children into this world of ours?"

"I know, I know. But Gemma changed everything, Xavier. I want it all now - Sunday family dinners, a house full of laughter, children running through our halls..."

"And does Gemma share these desires?" he asked with careful restraint.

"I honestly don't know. And I have no idea how to broach such a monumental conversation with her."

Xavier leaned forward intently. "My friend, the solution is simple - you talk to her."

"But what if she doesn't want the same future I'm envisioning and decides to end things between us?"

"The real question you need to answer is this: would having children be more important to you than having Gemma in your life?"

The answer came without any hesitation whatsoever. "Never."

"Then make that priority crystal clear to her, and you'll navigate this successfully."

I checked my watch, considering his straightforward advice carefully. "You're absolutely right, as usual." I would have this crucial conversation with Gemma after my niece and nephew returned home. Some discussions were far too important to rush or conduct with distractions present.

Chapter 335: The One Percent

Gemma's POV

"Auntie Gemma?" Vincenzo's voice drifted from inside the Thorne family safe house.

"Here on the terrace, Vincenzo," I called back, lacking the energy to move from my position on the wrought-iron chaise lounge overlooking the fortified compound grounds.

He appeared at the bulletproof glass doorway, his young face creased with concern as he took in my languid form sprawled among the cushions. "Are you feeling alright, auntie?"

"Yes, sweetheart, just having one of those heavy days." The bone-deep exhaustion that had been haunting me for weeks felt particularly oppressive this morning, even with the armed sentries maintaining their vigilant watch around the perimeter.

"Hmm. Can I get you anything?" His earnestness made my chest tighten with affection.

After considering for a moment, I managed a weary smile. "That decadent chocolate torte from the kitchen with extra ganache frosting would be perfect."

His face brightened with conspiratorial delight. "I think I'll grab two slices." He shot me a mischievous wink.

"Then summon Carmen and make it three," I suggested, suddenly craving companionship as much as the rich sweetness.

Soon, the three of us had gathered on the secured terrace, indulging in the luxurious dessert. I devoured my portion with surprising voracity, even sneaking forkfuls from Vincenzo's plate when mine vanished too quickly.

"Want more, auntie?" Vincenzo laughed, graciously sliding his plate toward me.

"I should probably stop," I sighed, though the temptation remained fierce.

"Chocolate torte before lunch?" Dominic's amused baritone joined our gathering as he emerged from the reinforced doorway, looking devastatingly handsome despite the shoulder holster visible beneath his tailored jacket.

"A minor transgression, my dangerous man," I smiled up at him. "Care for some?"

"No thank you, Songbird," he declined, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to my temple before settling beside me on the lounge. "So what's the plan for today?"

Vincenzo took command, announcing with impressive authority, "Nothing strenuous. Today we're maintaining low activity, staying quiet and letting auntie Gemma recuperate, because she's been feeling drained."

Dominic's dark eyebrows rose sharply. "Really? Is everyone functioning normally?"

"And why wouldn't we be?" I asked, finding his reaction oddly suspicious.

"Because you're typically the most energetic person in this compound, and these two can never sit still for more than a few minutes," Dominic observed, studying each of us with the calculating gaze of a seasoned Capo. "Who are you people and what have you done with my household?"

We burst into laughter, and warmth flooded through me at his casual claim of ownership over our makeshift family unit. "We'll behave ourselves today," I promised, resting my head against his muscular thigh. Within moments, I had drifted into unconsciousness.

When I surfaced from sleep, I found myself transported to our heavily secured bedroom, a cashmere throw draped over my body. The digital clock revealed it was mid-afternoon – I had been unconscious for several hours. This unusual lethargy had been plaguing me for days now.

I decided a hot shower might restore some vitality. As the steaming water cascaded over my skin, I mentally catalogued my recent symptoms: sharp irritability, crushing fatigue, and an almost compulsive craving for chocolate. I had always appreciated fine chocolate, but lately it felt more like an desperate addiction. Perhaps it was simply hormonal fluctuations, though something about this felt fundamentally different.

After dressing, I discovered Dominic, the children, and our guard dogs engaged in animated discussion in the main living area. Dominic immediately approached me, concern etched into his striking features.

"Gemma, are you functioning properly?" he asked, scrutinizing my face with intense focus.

"Yes, much better after resting," I forced a reassuring smile. "What has everyone so excited?"

"Vincenzo's birthday is approaching in a few days," Dominic explained.

Confusion clouded my thoughts. "Isn't your birthday coming up soon?" I asked Vincenzo.

"Yes, auntie, very soon now," Vincenzo confirmed with radiant excitement. "I absolutely love birthday celebrations!"

I returned his enthusiasm mechanically, but internally my mind began racing through calculations. Very soon... which meant we were already well into the month. Suddenly, everything around me seemed to blur as I mentally counted backwards through the weeks. When had my last cycle occurred? The voices in the room became muffled and distant, as if filtering through thick glass.

"Gemma..." Dominic's voice seemed to reach me from across a vast distance. "Gemma!" His firm grip on my shoulder yanked me back to the present moment.

"Woman, what dimension are you visiting?"

"Forgive me, darling, but I just remembered I needed to contact my mother," I lied, desperately needing an excuse for my obvious distraction.

"Carmen wants to visit that gelato shop near the central plaza," Dominic mentioned, and I seized the opportunity immediately.

"Excellent suggestion, let's go!" I responded with perhaps excessive enthusiasm. "I'll grab my purse."

During our walk through the family's controlled territory, I managed to slip away from Dominic's watchful protection and duck into a discrete pharmacy. Later, when we returned to the compound and he became absorbed in a video game session with the children, I retreated to our bedroom sanctuary.

"Dear God, please let me be mistaken," I whispered, extracting the pharmacy package from my designer handbag.

A short while later, I stood frozen in our private bathroom, staring at the undeniable result. No, no, no. This could not be happening. I heard Dominic calling my name from the bedroom, and my pulse accelerated dangerously. Hastily, I shoved everything back into the pharmacy bag and concealed it deep within a bathroom cabinet behind boxes of ammunition.

"Just one moment, Dominic," I called out, struggling to maintain composure.

"Gemma, something's wrong. You seem unwell today. Should I arrange for the family doctor to examine you?" Dominic enveloped me in his powerful embrace as I emerged from the bathroom.

"No, I'm just feeling slightly under the weather. I'm going to rest for a while longer," I replied absently, while internally chaos consumed my thoughts.

After Dominic left to check on the boys' security detail, I lay there overwhelmed by implications. What was I going to do? Dominic had made it crystal clear he never wanted additional children. Just when we had decided to consolidate our lives and everything seemed perfectly aligned, I ended up pregnant.

I had taken multiple tests – all positive. But how was this possible? I had been so meticulous. I propped myself up and retrieved my birth control pills from the nightstand drawer. All accounted for, none missed. Then I remembered my doctor's warning that no contraceptive method provided absolute certainty – pills were ninety-nine percent effective.

The realization struck me like a sniper's bullet – I was that one percent. Now what? This would completely transform my existence within the family structure, and I was not certain I was prepared. And Dominic... how would I tell him? How would he react? My greatest terror surfaced: he would probably abandon me...

Chapter 336: Dangerous Secret Revealed

Gemma's POV

Despite my internal panic, I couldn't just hide away in the fortified penthouse. I'd promised Carmen a sleepover with her friends, and we'd already prepared everything in the secured wing of the compound. Some commitments simply had to be honored, regardless of personal turmoil, especially when they involved the family's children.

"You look absolutely breathtaking," Dominic said, rising from the leather couch and walking toward me. His arms encircled my waist as he asked, "Feeling better now?" The weight of his gun holster pressed against my side, a constant reminder of our dangerous world.

"Yes, I am," I replied, giving him a quick peck on the lips.

I addressed everyone gathered in the main living room of our secured floor. "So, about today—Carmen's having her sleepover, and I need to ask all the boys to give the girls some space. We'll be taking over the entertainment room." Carmen's face immediately brightened at my announcement, her excitement cutting through the tension that always lingered in our heavily guarded home.

"I can cancel with my friends if you're not feeling well," she offered sweetly, her concern touching in a world where trust was a luxury few could afford.

"Absolutely not! I've been looking forward to this," I reassured her with a smile.

Vincenzo’s face fell. "Does that mean no gaming tournaments for us tonight?"

"Exactly!" I confirmed, trying not to laugh at his crestfallen expression.

Dominic jumped in to smooth things over. "Don’t worry, Vincenzo. We’ll keep clear of the girls. Xavier invited us to his private club anyway—the crew wants to practice so we can finally beat Lila at those strategy games. That sneaky little genius destroyed us last time." His laughter filled the room as he recalled our last family game night, a rare moment of normalcy in our high-stakes existence.

"That undercover nerd completely humiliated us. So embarrassing for a bunch of made guys!" Vincenzo lamented dramatically.

Carmen suddenly perked up with an idea. "Gemma, you should invite your friends from the organization too!"

"That’s brilliant, Carmen," I said, immediately grabbing my encrypted phone to message the girls through our secure channels.

Everyone arrived right on schedule, passing through the compound’s multiple security checkpoints. Despite my worries, the evening turned out wonderfully entertaining. Late into the night, Carmen and her friends were sound asleep across the mattresses in the entertainment room, looking so peaceful under the protection of our armed guards that I decided not to move them.

"Now that the little ones are asleep, it’s time for you to talk," Zoe said the moment I rejoined the adults in the private lounge, her tone leaving no room for evasion. As Dominic’s intelligence coordinator, she had an uncanny ability to read people.

"Talk about what?" I feigned ignorance, though I knew exactly what she meant.

"Something’s bothering you. You can’t fool me—you’ve been distracted all night, even with all the security protocols we had to follow." Zoe had apparently been observing me closely through her trained operative’s eyes without my noticing.

I exhaled slowly. "You're right. Girls, I need to tell you something, but it has to stay between us, at least for now. Family business."

"You're scaring me already," Ruby said, her eyes studying my face intently. Working in the organization's legal front had taught her to read danger signs.

"I'm pregnant," I announced bluntly. Their simultaneous squeals of delight echoed through the soundproofed room—excitement I unfortunately couldn't share.

Ivy's face lit up, her experience as the Don's wife lending authority to her words. "Gemma, that's amazing! I didn't know you and Dominic were planning on expanding the family line."

"That's the problem, Ivy—we weren't. And as far as I know, Dominic never wanted to be a father. He's always said the life we live is too dangerous for children." My voice trembled slightly as I expressed my deepest concern about our violent world.

Zoe's expression turned serious, her intelligence network giving her insight into Dominic's psyche. "I get it now. He really did always say he didn't want kids in this business. But Gemma, people change, especially when it comes to family bloodlines. Maybe his feelings about fatherhood have changed too."

"I don't know, Zoe. I have no idea how to tell him. What if this threatens everything we've built together in the organization?" Voicing my fears aloud only intensified my anxiety about our precarious position in the crime family hierarchy.

"Gemma, please," Lila interjected, always Dominic's defender despite her civilian status. "Dominic isn't some low-level soldier who would abandon his own blood. He's a Capo."

"I'm not saying he's disloyal to family, Lila. But he might think I did this intentionally to secure my position in the organization. I'm terrified of how he'll react when his entire world revolves around control and calculated risks." The knot in my stomach tightened.

Lila's practical nature came through as always. "You can't keep this hidden for long, Gemma. Better to tell him soon and face whatever comes. Secrets are dangerous in our world."

"Lila’s right," Ivy added, placing her warm hand over mine reassuringly, her wedding ring catching the light. "But I truly believe he’ll be happy about this. The family needs heirs."

"Maybe..." I sighed deeply. "I’ll tell him after the kids leave on Monday. Since I can’t predict his reaction, it’s better if they’re not around to witness it. This compound has seen enough violence."

Zoe’s face softened into a smile. "Nadia will absolutely lose her mind when she finds out there’s going to be another generation. And Bee will be over the moon too."

"At least someone will be happy about this," I said, feeling my chest constrict. "As for Dominic... I just don’t know how a man who’s built his life around calculated violence will handle an unplanned heir."

But my decision was made. Lila was right—facing this quickly was better than suffering through endless days of anticipation in our dangerous world. Whatever Dominic’s reaction might be, I needed to know sooner rather than later. Our future—and now our child’s future in this blood-soaked organization—depended on it.

Chapter 337: Three Positive Tests

Dominic’s POV

"Boss, playing like this, we’ll never take down Michael’s crew!" Jude groaned as he watched Caleb get absolutely demolished by Vincenzo in the shooting simulation game they were running on the underground network.

I was only half paying attention to the tactical training session, my mind elsewhere when Xavier turned to me with that calculating look he reserved for family business.

"So, Dominic, have you spoken to Gemma about what we discussed at the Social Union?" he asked casually, though I could tell everyone in our inner circle was suddenly interested in my answer.

"Not yet," I admitted, running a hand through my hair. "Gemma wasn’t feeling great today. I figured it would be better to wait until she’s feeling more herself before bringing up anything involving family operations."

Xavier nodded approvingly. "Smart move." Then he shifted his interrogation to another target. "And you, Martinez? Any progress with your situation?"

Daniel's expression immediately fell. "It's getting worse by the day. I think Lila is starting to suspect something about my real work," he confessed, looking genuinely distressed. "I'm starting to think this whole cover story is going to explode in my face."

"I warned you," Xavier said with no sympathy whatsoever. "But you wouldn't listen to keeping civilians completely in the dark."

"What am I supposed to do now?" Daniel asked, sounding desperate.

I stepped in with the simplest solution. "Come clean about the police work. Tell Lila everything you can without compromising family security before she finds out some other way."

The look of pure terror on Daniel's face was almost comical. "What if she dumps me? I love that woman more than I ever thought possible. I can't lose her."

Finn reached over and patted his shoulder sympathetically. "That's exactly why you need to fix this fast. Then pray she's forgiving enough to accept what you do for the family."

"Easy for you to say," Daniel grumbled. "You're practically perfect. You never mess up operations."

Finn's laughter filled the private room at the back of our legitimate business front, and I took the opportunity to change the subject.

"Speaking of perfect people, Finn, is your uncle serious about my mom? Like, really serious?" I asked, noticing Vincenzo perking up at the mention of our mother.

Finn held up a finger as if delivering an important lesson. "According to Uncle Andrew himself—and I quote—'it's not a casual arrangement, it's a serious relationship between two mature adults who know

exactly what they want.’ My uncle is head over heels for your mom, Dominic. If anything, she’s more likely to break his heart than the other way around."

His words genuinely relieved me. Knowing Mom had found someone who truly valued and adored her, especially someone outside our dangerous world, was all I could ask for.

The next day, Ruby arrived at Xavier’s heavily secured compound, giving Vincenzo and me our cue to head home. I was eager to see Gemma again—even a day apart felt too long when you lived in a world where enemies could strike at any moment. When we arrived at our fortified estate, we found Gemma and Carmen lounging by the pool, chatting animatedly about Carmen’s sleepover at one of the family safe houses. My niece was practically glowing with happiness from her time with the other protected family children.

"Boys!" Gemma called out with that smile that never failed to take my breath away. "Ready to finally beat Lila at those tactical simulations?"

"Auntie, they’re terrible," Vincenzo declared, dramatically throwing himself onto a poolside lounger. "They’ll never beat Lila at anything."

Gemma’s eyes sparkled with amusement. "Why don’t you two change and join us by the pool? It’s too hot to be reviewing security footage indoors anyway."

The suggestion was perfect for the scorching day. "Great idea. Come on, Vincenzo," I said, heading inside our climate-controlled fortress with my nephew trailing behind.

After changing into swim trunks, I went to the master bathroom cabinet for sunscreen. That’s when I noticed something tucked away in the corner—a small brown paper package that looked hastily hidden behind the medical supplies we kept for emergencies. Curious, I picked it up and opened it.

My heart stopped.

I emptied the contents onto the marble sink counter and stared in disbelief. Three pregnancy tests. All used. All positive.

POSITIVE.

My mind went blank for a second before erupting into chaos. I started laughing nervously, pacing the spacious bathroom floor. Then reality hit me—the girls had all slept over last night for security reasons. This could belong to any of them. But God, how I hoped they were Gemma's!

Not knowing what to do, I called Xavier on our encrypted line.

"Missing me already?" he answered teasingly.

"Xavier, if you're near the redhead, step away from Ruby," I warned, keeping my voice low.

There was silence for a moment. "Alright, Dominic, you're scaring me. What's going on?"

"I found pregnancy tests hidden in the bathroom cabinet. Three of them. All positive. What do I do?" My voice was shaking.

"Wait—are you going to be a father?" Xavier asked excitedly, and I could practically see him ready to spread the news throughout the entire organization.

"I don't know, Xavier!" I cut him off quickly. "All the girls were here last night for safety protocols. It could be any of them."

"With our luck, it's probably Ivy giving Caleb baby number six," Xavier laughed.

"For God's sake, they already have five heirs!" I hissed, horrified at the thought of managing security for even more Thorne children.

"So what's your plan?" Xavier pressed.

"That’s why I’m calling you on a secure line! Should I ask Gemma about it? Or pretend I never saw them?"

"If you don’t ask, I will," Xavier insisted. "I can’t just sit around waiting for someone to make an announcement that affects our entire family structure. Ask her now—I need to know!"

"I’ll ask and call you back."

"No way! I want to know now. What if it’s Ruby’s? That would change everything for our operations!"

"Xavier, I’ll call when I know something."

"You’re impossible!" he complained. "Fine, you have a little while longer before I come over there myself."

"I’ll call when I know," I repeated and hung up.

My hands were sweaty, my heart pounding as I carefully placed the tests back in their package. Taking a deep breath, I headed back to the pool area, wondering how exactly I was going to approach this conversation that could potentially change not just our relationship, but our entire position within the family hierarchy.

Chapter 338: Building Our Dynasty

Gemma’s POV

I was laughing at one of Vincenzo’s ridiculous impressions of his uncle Xavier when Dominic approached our poolside lounge, his expression unreadable in that way that always made my blood run cold. In the mafia world, unreadable meant dangerous.

"Time for more sunscreen, handsome," I said playfully, extending my hand toward him. Instead of the bottle I expected, Dominic placed something rectangular and lightweight in my palm.

My heart stopped when I recognized the pregnancy test package. The same one I had hidden in our bedroom safe yesterday, behind the emergency cash and fake passports. Heat flooded my face as I shot upright, my mouth suddenly dry as desert sand.

"You found them," I whispered, barely able to form the words.

"I did," Dominic replied, his tone carrying that deadly calm that preceded either execution orders or life-changing decisions. "Want to explain this to me?"

"Dominic, I..." My throat constricted as fear coursed through my veins like ice water.

His green eyes locked onto mine with laser precision. "I need to know right now, Gemma. Whose are these?"

"Mine," I admitted, meeting his stare even as tears threatened to spill. In our world, showing weakness could be fatal, but hiding truth from your capo was worse.

"Yours?" Something shifted in his expression, a crack in that stone facade. "Does that mean..."

"I swear I was careful with the pill," I rushed to explain, words tumbling over each other. "Something went wrong, and I—"

"Gemma," he cut me off with the authority he used in family meetings. "Focus. Tell me what this means."

My shoulders sagged as I stared at the concrete beneath my feet. "I'm pregnant. I bought those tests yesterday when we went to the ice cream parlor as cover..."

Before I could finish the confession, Dominic crushed me against his chest so hard I could barely breathe, his arms forming a protective cage around me.

"I’m going to be a father!" he shouted, his voice echoing across our secured compound. "I’m going to be a father!"

His reaction left me stunned. This was not the cold calculation or strategic thinking I had expected. Dominic pulled back to kiss me fiercely, then turned toward the children lounging by the pool, his face transformed by a grin I had never seen before.

"Kids! You’re getting a cousin!" he announced with the same pride he used when announcing successful territory expansions.

Vincenzo and Carmen exploded into celebration, their shouts mixing with the excited barking of our trained guard dogs who sensed the jubilant energy.

Dominic immediately pulled out his encrypted phone, speed-dialing Xavier. "Brother, spread the word through the family channels—I’m going to be a father!" His voice vibrated with pure elation while I sat there overwhelmed, tears streaming down my face.

"Uncle Dominic, can I tell everyone in the family?" Vincenzo was practically bouncing, his excitement infectious even to our usually stoic security detail.

Dominic turned to me, those deadly green eyes now dancing with joy. "What do you say, my goddess? Should we make it official through family channels, or let our little messenger here handle the announcements?"

Through my tears, I managed a smile. "Let him be our family herald!"

Vincenzo wasted no time, initiating a secure video call on the family communication network he had helped establish during our last gathering at the compound. He delivered the news with all the dramatic flair of a seasoned consigliere, panning between Dominic and me, zooming in on the test package, and providing live commentary on everyone’s reactions. It was impossible to determine who showed more excitement—Vincenzo or Dominic.

"Stop crying, my goddess," Dominic whispered, holding me against his chest. "You should be celebrating. We're about to bring the next generation of our family into this world." He pressed his lips to my forehead. "Why didn't you come to me immediately when you suspected?"

"Because I thought you would see it as a liability," I confessed, my voice muffled against his shoulder. "I didn't know how to break the news. Everyone in the organization knows you never wanted the responsibility of an heir."

"That was before you changed everything for me, my goddess! With you, I want more heirs than Don Caleb himself!" His grin turned wicked.

"Don't even joke about that, Dominic. They have multiple children. We are absolutely not having that many children," I protested, which only made him laugh harder.

"I was thinking more along the lines of a whole army," he teased, causing me to choke while everyone around us erupted in laughter.

Soon our secure phones were ringing constantly with congratulations from family associates, and before long, our compound was filled with celebration as word spread through the organization. Only after the last guest departed and we retreated to the safety of our bedroom could Dominic and I finally talk privately.

He settled against the reinforced headboard and pulled me onto his lap, his hand constantly caressing my still-flat stomach, a permanent smile transforming his usually intimidating features.

"You have no idea the depth of my happiness right now," he said, repeating the sentiment he had expressed throughout the evening.

"I was terrified about your reaction," I admitted, resting my head against his shoulder.

"I actually discussed this possibility with Xavier yesterday at the underground club," Dominic said, catching me completely off guard.

"What do you mean?"

"I told him I was feeling ready to establish a true dynasty with you. I watched a made man playing with his son in the pool, and I started envisioning myself in that role."

"Really? And here I was, convinced you would see me and our baby as targets that compromised your position."

"Never, my love. You transformed my entire worldview, Gemma. First you made me want you despite the danger, then you made me want you in my territory permanently, and now you have made me want you as the mother of my legacy."

"Dominic, when you say legacy..." I raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

"My goddess, in our world, there are no limits on expanding power! It is about building an empire. We have started the bloodline, now let us build the dynasty."

I could not help but laugh at his audacity. Dominic truly had no boundaries when he set his mind on something. And if I was not careful, he might actually convince me that a whole army of little heirs was a reasonable family planning strategy.

Chapter 339: Deadly Partnership

Marcus's POV

I stared through the grimy window of Nancy's cramped apartment while she rambled about her chance encounter with Dominic at some upscale nightclub. The thought of those two reuniting was music to my ears. Nancy was nothing more than a calculating gold-digger with expensive tastes, and Dominic remained the same naive fool he'd always been. Let her keep him distracted while I focused on claiming what I truly wanted - that exquisite woman, Gemma.

The irony wasn't lost on me. Years ago, when Dominic first brought Nancy around the family compound, the boy was completely smitten while she was spreading her legs for half the crew behind his back. Watching him parade around like a lovesick puppy while being cuckolded was one of the few entertaining moments during my final days with the Thorne organization.

"Marcus, are you even paying attention to what I'm saying?" Nancy's shrill voice cut through my reminiscing.

"You should definitely make another play for Dominic," I replied without turning from the window, still lost in my scheming.

"That's exactly what I've been telling you this whole time!" She sounded pleased with herself. "Besides, it won't exactly be a hardship. The man looks even better than he did when we were together."

"His bank accounts have grown substantially as well," I observed, watching her eyes light up with greed like a true mercenary.

"This is absolutely perfect!" The mention of money always got her motor running. "Though I have to admit, he seems sharper than before."

"That should worry you."

"Please. I'm not concerned in the least." Her arrogance was both grating and potentially dangerous to our plans.

"You should be. And don't underestimate his current piece - that woman is absolutely breathtaking."

Nancy waved her hand dismissively. "I can handle any competition. First loves die hard, and I know exactly which buttons to push."

"Sweetheart, you couldn't hold a candle to Gemma if your life depended on it. That woman is pure perfection."

"Gemma, you said?" Something in her tone shifted, becoming sharper and more focused.

"Yes, that's her name."

"How very interesting. Do you happen to have a picture of this goddess?" There was a calculating gleam in her eyes that I hadn't seen before.

"Check Dominic's social media. He's not exactly secretive about flaunting his prize."

I watched with growing curiosity as Nancy immediately pulled out her phone and began scrolling. Within moments, a slow, predatory smile spread across her face like poison seeping through water.

"Well, well, well. What an incredibly small world we live in. Lady luck is definitely smiling on us tonight!"

"Care to elaborate?" Now she had my complete attention.

"You remember that man I've been visiting upstate? The one doing hard time for assault? Turns out your precious Gemma is his ex-girlfriend. And baby, he wants that bitch dead in the worst possible way!"

"Is that so? How wonderfully convenient." My mind immediately began calculating the possibilities. "Though killing a woman of her caliber seems like such a waste. Better to thoroughly enjoy her first, then dispose of her when the novelty wears off." A delicious thought crossed my mind - perhaps this prison connection could eliminate Dominic as well. Two birds with one stone, leaving me to inherit everything as the grieving father figure.

"Oh, that's exactly what he has planned. Trust me, either way, that little princess isn't getting her happily ever after."

"And what exactly is your cut in this arrangement?"

"Listen here, my king, I think we need to form a partnership with Nick. Everyone walks away with exactly what they want." Now she was speaking my language. "Plus, I want to have some quality time with Miss Perfect myself."

"I'm sure you two psychopaths can work out the details."

"When exactly does your boyfriend get released?"

"Soon enough. But I'm going to start laying the groundwork immediately. I'll reel Dominic back in and pay sweet little Gemma a friendly social call."

"Nancy, don't let overconfidence be your downfall. Dominic won't be the same pushover he used to be."

"I know exactly what I'm doing, Marcus. Trust me."

"If you say so." Something told me this particular snake would find Dominic much harder to charm this time around. "Do you happen to have Gemma's phone number?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Hand it over. Nick can start his psychological warfare from behind bars. The clever bastard managed to get his hands on a cell phone inside."

"Your prison pen pal isn't completely stupid," I remarked as she rolled her eyes and scribbled down Gemma's number on a napkin.

"Now make yourself useful and fix me a sandwich. All this plotting has made me hungry," I commanded, settling back into her worn couch like I owned the place.

"Hungry? Handle it your damn self. You've got two working hands, and I'm certainly not your personal servant. You're already pushing your luck by crashing in my apartment rent-free," Nancy snapped back with venom.

"That's precisely why you should be a gracious hostess and take care of your guest."

"Gracious hostess, my ass! Don't think for one second that you can turn me into your personal maid. If you want food, get up and make it yourself."

"You do realize you're absolutely insufferable, don't you?" I said, reluctantly hauling myself up from the couch.

"Absolutely. But without this insufferable woman, you'd be sleeping in some cardboard box after getting permanently 'invited to leave' that five-star hotel when your credit cards got declined."

I trudged toward her pathetic excuse for a kitchen, already wondering if this prison connection might be useful for eliminating Nancy as well once she outlived her usefulness. The woman was becoming far too mouthy for her own good, and frankly, she wasn't nearly as indispensable as she believed herself to be.

Chapter 340: Seeds of Doubt

Gemma's POV

Our time with Vincenzo and Carmen had been nothing short of magical. The children were thrilled about having a little cousin on the way, and they showered me with the same protective attention Dominic did. I had to admit, being under the wing of the Thorne family felt like living in a fortress of devotion.

Dominic wasted no time securing an appointment with Dr. Taylor, a task made considerably easier due to his relationship with Bee. After the children were safely escorted to their private school by armed security, Dominic drove me to the medical center in his armored sedan, practically vibrating with anticipation.

In the doctor's office, Dominic transformed into an overeager soldier receiving battle instructions. He absorbed every word Dr. Taylor said with military precision, asked countless tactical questions about my health, requested written protocols, and paid attention to every recommendation as if my life depended on it. Which, in his mind, it probably did. We left the appointment armed with plans and contingencies. After a secured stop at the family's private pharmacy to fill my prescriptions, Dominic dropped me off at work with a kiss that lingered possessively on my lips.

When I reached my desk, I spotted a flower arrangement waiting for me. They were wildflowers, pretty in their rustic way, but something about them sent ice through my veins. My hand trembled as I plucked the card from among the blooms. In an instant, all my joy evaporated into cold terror.

Nick, or someone operating under his orders from prison, had sent them. The message was brief but carried the weight of a death threat: a reminder that I belonged to him, and prison bars wouldn't change that. My blood turned to winter. How dare he penetrate the Thorne family's protected territory?

I immediately photographed both the flowers and card, sending the images to Inspector Daniel through our secure channel before requesting the flowers be incinerated. Following Daniel's protocols, I preserved the card as evidence for the family's intelligence network. I decided against telling Dominic immediately. I'd handled the breach properly, and there was no need to trigger his lethal protective instincts during what should be a celebration of our future.

Focusing on my work proved to be a necessary distraction. Having been away for a while, I expected a mountain of business awaiting my attention, but my prior organizational systems had held steady. There wasn't much ground to recover.

At noon, Jude and Lila materialized on my secured floor, determined to extract me for lunch.

"Gemma, you're carrying the next generation of this family," Jude lectured as we entered the restaurant under discreet security surveillance. "You can't skip meals like some street soldier. You need to eat like the protected asset you are."

I had planned to grab something quick at my fortified desk. "You're absolutely right, Jude. I was so focused on work I didn't even consider it."

Lila grinned. "Lucky you have us as your personal security detail."

We were deep in animated conversation when someone deliberately bumped into me from behind. Turning around, I found a woman resting her manicured claws on my shoulder with predatory familiarity.

"Oh, darling, I'm so terribly sorry!" she exclaimed with theatrical precision. "I'm such a disaster waiting to happen." Her hand seemed surgically attached to my shoulder.

"It's fine," I responded with ice-cold politeness, removing her hand with controlled force. "Accidents occur."

"Well, this is exactly what we didn't need," Jude muttered under his breath, his voice carrying dangerous undertones.

"Jude!" The woman's eyes widened in calculated surprise. "My heavens, it's been an eternity!"

"Could have stayed that way until my funeral," Jude replied, his irritation shifting into something more lethal.

"Oh, Jude, don't be so hostile. It's been far too long." She smiled and touched his back with familiar possession.

"I'm not being hostile. I simply despise you. Actually, to be completely transparent, I find you revolting." Jude moved away from her touch, but she escalated by inviting herself into our protected space.

"Jude, you need to develop some sophistication." She seated herself without invitation, a move that would have earned a bullet in less civilized circumstances. "Now introduce me to your companions. Or are they more than mere friends?"

"Not everyone operates like you do. And I won't make introductions because they don't need to know a parasitic opportunist like you." Jude's agitation was becoming something that could draw security attention.

"Well then, I'll handle the introductions myself." The woman's audacity was breathtaking, even by black market socialite standards. "Pleasure to meet you both. I'm Nancy. Jude harbors resentment because I dated his friend and the arrangement ended poorly." My heart sank into my stomach. This was Dominic's ex-girlfriend, the one who'd been circling rival families.

"Shut your mouth and disappear, you snake in designer clothing," Jude hissed with barely contained violence.

"Oh Jude, even Dominic has moved past our history. I encountered him at the underground club recently and we shared such a wonderful reunion." Her manufactured smile made my stomach revolt. "Do you know Dominic, ladies? He's such a prize catch! We had quite the relationship before, and he

never committed to anyone else because I was the greatest passion of his life. He never recovered from losing me, you understand?"

I worked to maintain my composure, refusing to give this predator the satisfaction of seeing blood in the water. I needed to speak with Dominic before drawing any conclusions, but her words felt like poison in my veins.

"Nancy, vacate this area immediately or I'm summoning security," Jude warned, his anger approaching critical mass.

"Goodness, Jude, maintain some control. You'll give yourself a cardiac event." Nancy's theatrical concern deserved an award for manipulation. "But you still haven't shared your friends' names with me."

"You're worthless debris, Nancy. You know exactly who's sitting here," Jude snapped with lethal clarity. "This encounter wasn't coincidental."

"Jude!" She pressed her hand over her heart in wounded performance. "I'm devastated that you'd suspect such calculation from me. When I tell Dominic about this treatment, he'll be quite upset with you."

"How do you lie so effortlessly without choking on your own tongue?" Jude countered.

I was so absorbed in their verbal warfare that I hadn't noticed Lila had slipped away from the table until a security guard materialized beside Nancy, flanked by the restaurant manager.

"Good afternoon, everyone," the manager said with professional calm. "Miss, I must politely insist you accompany me without creating additional disturbance. You're disrupting our valued customers' experience."

"But I'm also a paying customer," Nancy protested with rising volume.

"It would be preferable to avoid complications, miss." The manager remained immovable. Nancy glanced at the security guard, her confident smile finally cracking under pressure.

"You've always been such an insufferable burden, Wright." She snatched her purse, stood with wounded dignity, and was professionally escorted toward the exit.

"That encounter was calculated warfare, Gemma. That woman knows exactly who you are and what you represent," Jude said, taking my hand with protective intensity. "Please don't believe a single word that came out of her poisonous mouth."

Still reeling from the confrontation, I assured Jude that I wouldn't accept Nancy's claims at face value and would discuss everything with Dominic later. But her words had planted seeds of doubt that would require careful extraction.