Mafia Mask 341

Chapter 341: Silent Threat Calls

Gemma’s POV

As the day at the office concluded, Dominic informed me through our encrypted line that he’d be arriving home late due to accumulated family business paperwork, arranging for one of his trusted soldiers to escort me home instead. After the lunch incident with his volatile ex-girlfriend, my mind was already primed to wander down dangerous paths of speculation about his whereabouts in our blood-soaked world.

For a long while, I tortured myself with uncertainty, eventually texting Zoe through our secure channel to confirm Dominic was actually at headquarters. I felt compelled to explain my concerns to her, hating the paranoia creeping into our relationship - a toxic side effect of loving a man whose enemies would kill to hurt him through me.

Upon arriving at our heavily fortified safe house, I was struck by the unusual silence. The kids had returned to the main family compound, and I already found myself missing their energy and laughter that briefly made our dangerous world feel normal. My solitude didn’t last long, as Amber bounded into view, welcoming me with his customary exuberance. Since joining our household, the German Shepherd puppy had established his domain in the kitchen, where our housekeeper Maia lavished him with endless attention and treats. His bed now resided there permanently, though he never failed to race through the reinforced corridors whenever someone breached our security perimeter.

"Hey there, Amber! How was your day guarding the fortress, little soldier?" I knelt to scratch behind his ears, his tail wagging furiously in response. "Mine was pretty uneventful, thankfully."

After showering and eating dinner alone in our dining room overlooking the harbor - Dominic’s late return hanging over me like a storm cloud - my mind began its dangerous wandering. Nancy’s venomous words echoed in my thoughts, and doubts about Dominic’s whereabouts crept in despite my best efforts to suppress them. In our world, late meetings could mean anything from legitimate family business to deadly territorial disputes.

It was late in the evening when I finally heard the reinforced front door’s multiple locks disengaging. Amber, who had been dozing at the foot of our bed with one ear always alert for intruders, immediately

perked up, his entire body vibrating with excitement as he prepared to greet his favorite human and protector.

"Stay down, Amber," I whispered, pressing a finger to my lips. "We're giving him the cold shoulder tonight. He abandoned us for family business, remember? Pretend you're asleep." The dog settled briefly, earning a quiet "Good boy" from me.

I closed my swollen, tear-stained eyes just as our bedroom door's security lock clicked open. My canine conspirator promptly betrayed me, leaping up with a joyful bark to greet Dominic, who was undoubtedly still carrying the scent of gunpowder and danger from whatever family matter had kept him away.

"Traitor!" I accused, sitting upright in bed.

Dominic flipped on the dim lighting system, his initial smile evaporating when he saw my face. Even in the low light, his trained eye immediately catalogued my distress.

"Songbird, what's wrong? Why have you been crying?" Concern etched his battle-hardened features as he approached, Amber trotting loyally behind him, sensing the tension.

"You were gone forever," I complained, knowing it sounded childish even as I said it, especially considering the deadly responsibilities that came with his position in the family hierarchy.

"I know, longer than I intended. The financial reports from recent territory expansions piled up more than I realized," he explained apologetically, setting his concealed weapons on the nightstand with practiced efficiency. "I'm sorry for leaving you alone all evening in lockdown. I didn't think it would upset you this much - I just wanted to clear my desk before tomorrow's family meeting."

"I shouldn't be this upset, but..." I averted my eyes, embarrassment coloring my admission of weakness in a world where showing vulnerability could prove fatal.

"But what? Is something wrong? Are you and the baby okay?" His brow creased with the kind of worry that had sent men to early graves when they threatened his family.

"I ran into Nancy today," I blurted, deciding directness was best when dealing with a man whose world operated on brutal honesty.

Dominic's expression hardened immediately, his jaw tightening with barely controlled rage. "That poisonous bitch sought you out deliberately?"

"I was having lunch with Jude and Lila at the restaurant when she appeared," I explained, still studying my hands rather than meeting those dangerous emerald eyes that could shift from tender to lethal in seconds.

I recounted the entire encounter - her calculated appearance, her razor-sharp insinuations designed to draw blood, the coldness in her eyes as she delivered her barbs about their recent encounter at the underground establishment where family business was conducted.

Dominic listened intently, his expression increasingly murderous as I spoke. I could practically feel the violence radiating from him as his protective instincts flared.

"Dominic, did you see her recently?" I needed confirmation straight from the man whose word was bond in our dangerous world.

"Gemma, you know I went to meet Xavier at the private club for family business. She showed up unannounced like the parasite she is, but I swear I barely acknowledged her existence," he stated firmly, his voice carrying the weight of a blood oath. "You have my word as a made man."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"The kids were visiting, and we were having such a wonderful week of peace that I genuinely forgot to mention such an insignificant encounter. It wasn't intentional secrecy - it simply slipped my mind. I'm sorry, baby."

"What do you still feel for her?" The question burned my throat as I asked it, knowing that in his world, past attachments could become deadly liabilities.

"Once, I felt tremendous anger, but now? Nothing but disgust. She was my first taste of what passes for love in our world, and like any young soldier, I mistook obsession for devotion. Those feelings died long ago when I learned what real love looks like." His eyes locked with mine, earnest and unwavering. "Can you trust me on this?"

"I trust you," I affirmed, meaning every word despite the dangerous world we inhabited.

He gathered me into his powerful arms, holding me close against his chest where I could feel his heartbeat and the reassuring weight of his strength. We remained entangled in that protective embrace for several quiet minutes.

"There's something else I need to tell you," I said, remembering the ominous flowers. If I expected transparency from him, I needed to offer the same, especially when our enemies used every weakness against us. "Something that happened today."

"Something good, I hope?" His voice was weary with the exhaustion of a man who carried deadly responsibilities.

"No, unfortunately not." I felt him sigh heavily, his body tensing for whatever new threat I was about to reveal. "I received flowers."

"Damn that Marcus!" Dominic growled, his voice carrying the promise of violence. "What did the card say?"

"They weren't from your father. They were from Nick." His body went rigid against mine, every muscle coiling like a predator preparing to strike. "The card said I should remember that I belong to him."

"What a fucking day," he muttered, frustration and fury warring in his voice. "Did you keep the card? I need to call Daniel immediately."

"Yes, I saved it. I already contacted Daniel through secure channels - he's investigating with the flower shop and checking street surveillance. I handled it properly, but I wanted you to know before the family meeting."

"Thank you for telling me. We need to identify whoever's helping that psychotic bastard immediately. I'll follow up with Daniel tomorrow to check his progress and discuss permanent solutions."

His expression softened as he studied my face, though his eyes retained their lethal edge. "You should rest. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet," he admitted.

"I'll go downstairs and make you something." I moved to rise, but he caught my wrist with gentle firmness.

"I need to shower first," he said with a meaningful smile that temporarily banished the darkness from his features. "Join me?"

"I've already showered," I teased, recognizing the intent behind his invitation and the way danger always seemed to heighten his need for physical connection.

"But I love your company," he responded with that mischievous grin that always weakened my resolve, making me forget momentarily that this man had blood on his hands.

We showered together - his desire for more than companionship impossible to ignore as he worshipped my body with the desperate intensity of a man who knew how quickly everything could be taken away. Afterward, I accompanied him to our fortified kitchen while he ate, then we retreated to bed where exhaustion quickly pulled me into slumber.

I jolted awake to my encrypted phone's insistent ringing, the room still shrouded in darkness. Dominic stirred beside me, instantly alert as his hand moved instinctively toward his bedside weapon before reaching to switch on the lamp. My heart accelerated - late-night calls in our world rarely brought anything but blood and bullets, and my thoughts immediately flew to my mother and grandmother's safety.

"Hello?" I answered breathlessly, noting Dominic's protective positioning. Only silence greeted me. "Hello? Is anyone there?" Heavy, deliberate breathing sounded from the other end, calculated and menacing. "Who is this?" The screen displayed an untraceable number. "Hello? Say something."

The call disconnected abruptly. Ice-cold fear knotted in my stomach as I considered what new threat might be stalking our household. Dominic took the phone and attempted to return the call, but it went straight to a disconnected line.

Panic rising, I called my mother through our secure family line, waking her. She assured me everything was fine - she had spoken with both my grandmother and her armed caretaker before retiring to their safe room. "It's probably just psychological warfare," she soothed, though her voice carried the strain of a woman who'd learned to live with constant danger.

I ended the call somewhat reassured, but uneasiness lingered like smoke in the air. The mysterious late-night caller had left me unsettled and on high alert. In our world, such calls were rarely innocent - they were usually the prelude to violence, and I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching, waiting, and preparing to strike at the heart of everything Dominic and I had built together.

Chapter 342: Terror in Aisles

Gemma's POV

Recently, my nights had been shattered by phantom calls that left me on edge. Each time my phone rang in the darkness, I'd answer to find nothing but labored breathing on the other end—someone lurking in the shadows but never revealing themselves. The relentless harassment had carved deep shadows under my eyes, and exhaustion clung to me like a second skin in this dangerous world I'd been pulled into.

"Gemma... Gemma!" Dominic's commanding voice sliced through the haze clouding my thoughts.

"What? I'm sorry, what did you say?" I blinked hard, forcing myself to focus on his concerned expression across our breakfast table in the secured penthouse.

"You need proper rest," Dominic stated, his jaw tightening with the controlled anger of a man accustomed to eliminating threats. "We should get you a new secured line through the family's network."

I shook my head firmly. "That won't be necessary. These calls will eventually stop." The idea of surrendering yet another piece of my independence to the Thorne organization's protective web felt like another small defeat.

"Then at least power down your phone during the night," Dominic suggested, his tone carrying the authority of someone used to giving orders. "If there's family business requiring your attention, they can reach me instead."

"Actually, that makes sense." I nodded, rising from my chair. "But right now, I need to get to my position at Zenith Systems."

Dominic's hand closed around mine with the possessive grip that had become familiar. "Stay in the compound today. Rest under proper security. Caleb would understand completely."

"Working keeps my mind occupied," I explained, squeezing his fingers. "I need that mental distraction from all this chaos."

"Understood," he conceded with obvious reluctance. "But were you listening to anything I discussed earlier?"

"Um..." I hesitated, realizing my thoughts had been completely scattered during our conversation.

Dominic's smile carried both affection and exasperation. "Was I conducting a one-sided briefing this entire morning, my queen?"

"I apologize," I whispered, settling onto his lap and pressing my lips to his in a soft kiss.

His emerald eyes brightened with renewed focus. "I was explaining that your parents and I are coordinating a visit to your grandmother's estate this weekend. And Vincenzo is joining us—he's particularly enthusiastic about the trip."

"Really?" The prospect immediately lifted my spirits. "Let's include Carmen in our plans too!"

"My sister and Gerard are going to be completely pampered," Dominic laughed with genuine warmth.

"Honestly, I'm seriously considering permanently relocating those two to our household," I teased.

"Nadia would probably hand them over with signed custody documents and a bow on top." His comment drew the first genuine laughter from me in days.

"I'll coordinate all the arrangements then," Dominic promised with the efficiency of someone who commanded resources.

The thought of a weekend escape to the countryside filled me with genuine excitement. Visiting Grandma and stepping away from the city's dangerous undercurrents would provide exactly the respite I desperately needed.

Later that afternoon, I informed Dominic I'd return home slightly delayed. I wanted to select a special gift for my grandmother along with her beloved imported chocolates—a sweet addiction that definitely ran through our bloodline.

At the upscale shopping center, I made my way directly to the luxury home furnishings store. I instructed Hunter, my assigned security detail, to maintain his position at the main entrance. The retail environment seemed secure enough, and I didn't require a imposing shadow trailing me through every aisle.

I was examining an elegant cream-colored throw blanket adorned with delicate rose patterns—perfectly suited to Grandma's refined floral preferences—when suddenly two hands seized my waist. A body pressed against mine from behind, violating my personal space. I spun around, immediately alert.

"Gemma, sweetheart! What an unexpected pleasure encountering you here." Marcus's face loomed mere inches from mine.

Horror washed over me as I realized I'd been cornered in the store's rear section, with towering shelves blocking any rapid escape routes. How had he tracked me to this location?

"Get away from me," I hissed, attempting to push him backward. Instead, he pressed his body more aggressively against mine, pinning me against the merchandise display.

"Come now! Give me a proper family greeting." He grabbed my throat, trying to force me into unwanted contact.

Terror surged through my veins as I struggled against his grip. My phone began ringing inside my purse, but Marcus snatched it away and hurled it to the floor. Panic clawed at my chest.

"I'm going to demonstrate, Gemma, that you've chosen the wrong Frost," he growled, pulling me closer with bruising force.

I fought desperately against his restraints. "You're the wrong Frost! Release me, you disgusting animal! You're absolutely revolting! I can't tolerate your voice. Your touch makes my skin crawl."

"Oh, darling," he whispered, his breath hot and repulsive against my skin, "when I'm claiming you, making you submit, you'll change your perspective completely."

His words triggered waves of nausea. He attempted to hold me motionless for his assault, but I kept twisting away with every ounce of strength.

"Here's our plan, Gemma." His voice dropped to a menacing whisper near my ear. "We'll exit this establishment and locate a private venue. I'm going to take you so thoroughly that you'll forget Dominic ever existed."

Pure rage boiled within my chest. "You're absolutely sick! I'm not going anywhere with you!" I summoned all my disgust and spat directly in his face.

"You worthless whore!" he roared, striking me hard across the cheek.

The sharp sting shocked my system. I hadn't anticipated such blatant violence, and cold fear replaced my anger. I opened my mouth to scream for help, but he clamped his palm over it, pressing me harder against the shelving unit.

"You prefer the difficult approach." His eyes gleamed with malicious intent. "I actually enjoy it more when you resist. Makes me more aggressive. You know what? I'm going to claim you right here and now—a quick conquest right in this public store."

Marcus laughed under his breath and attempted another assault. I struggled against him with desperate strength and squeezed my eyes shut. Suddenly, the crushing pressure lifted. When I opened my eyes, I witnessed Hunter delivering a devastating punch to Marcus's jaw.

Tears streamed down my face uncontrollably. All I wanted was to return home to Dominic and erase this nightmare from my memory. While Hunter turned to assess my condition, Marcus scrambled to his feet and fled the store like the coward he was.

"Miss Valance, are you injured?" Hunter asked, genuine concern evident in his professional demeanor.

"Terrible," I sobbed. "Please, just extract me from here and take me home immediately."

"Yes, miss." He bent down to retrieve my purse and handed it to me carefully. Seeing my unsteady state, he offered his arm for physical support. "Mr. Dominic contacted me because you weren't responding to calls. He requires immediate communication with you." Hunter explained while retrieving his own phone from the floor.

"I'll contact him myself," I said, attempting to steady my erratic breathing.

"Actually, he's currently holding on the line..." Hunter returned to his device and explained to Dominic what had transpired. I could hear Dominic's furious voice through the speaker, threatening to terminate Hunter's employment immediately.

"Let me speak with him," I said, reaching for the phone. Before Dominic could continue his tirade, I quickly interrupted. "Dominic, I specifically asked Hunter to wait outside the store. This wasn't his failure—I didn't anticipate any danger in a home goods establishment. Please, I'm coming home now. I need you desperately."

Dominic’s POV

I was at my breaking point. Gemma had endured a terrifying encounter with Marcus yesterday in the territory, all because she momentarily dismissed her bodyguard outside the jewelry store. That exiled bastard had crossed every line the Thorne family had drawn, and I was determined to make him pay with blood.

When I called Daniel, he suggested that Gemma should file a complaint with our contacts in the police department, but she was deeply traumatized by the attack. Despite barely sleeping, she insisted on going to her position at Caleb’s legitimate front company today, which only intensified my murderous rage.

I arrived at Zenith Systems headquarters in a foul mood. Dealing with Marcus, this persistent threat to our family’s honor, was my priority. He had dared to put his filthy hands on my woman again, and I wouldn’t let this betrayal stand. The old fool had forgotten that exile didn’t mean immunity from Thorne justice.

My mind was consumed with thoughts of Gemma and the child she carried. The stress and fury became overwhelming as I imagined what could have happened. Without hesitation, I grabbed my jacket and left the office, my hand instinctively checking the Glock holstered beneath my suit.

When I reached the underground garage and approached my Maserati, I was stunned by the audacity of the woman waiting for me. Nancy was draped across my car’s hood like some cheap streetwalker, dressed in an obscenely short dress that screamed desperation.

"Nancy, get off my car. I have family business to attend to," I demanded, having zero patience for this deplorable woman who had sold herself to every rival family’s bed.

"My goodness, Dominic, so tense! That little shopkeeper of yours clearly doesn’t know how to service a capo properly," Nancy replied with biting sarcasm, sliding off the hood with practiced seduction.

"Shut your mouth and leave. Now." What little restraint I had was rapidly disappearing, my trigger finger itching.

"Don’t be so harsh, Dominic. I’m here specifically to relieve that tension and remind you what a real woman feels like." Nancy slithered toward me and wrapped her arms around my neck. "I’ll show you how much you used to crave me back then."

"You truly are shameless." I pried her manicured claws from my neck and stepped back. "What happened, Nancy? Did the rival families finally get tired of your services?"

"Don’t be stupid, Dominic!" Her composure nearly cracked. "You know your father was the one who pursued me when he still had power."

"Oh, were you some innocent, defenseless virgin? Please, Nancy. You knew exactly what game you were playing when you spread your legs for anyone with territory. You just didn’t anticipate me helping Caleb strip Marcus of everything." I gave her an icy smile that had made grown men piss themselves.

"Dominic, some of us have to fight to survive in this world," she replied, no longer smiling, her mask slipping.

"In your case, you weren’t fighting for survival. You sold your body for access to our operations and protection money. But you know what? I should thank you for leaving with that worthless exile. It saved me from becoming a pathetic fool like Marcus. Now get out of my way before I forget you’re still breathing under our family’s mercy."

"You’re just upset, but I know the cure for that kind of stress." Nancy smiled predatorily and in one swift movement, opened the door of the car next to mine and shoved me inside, making me fall onto the leather seat.

Without hesitation, she hiked up her dress to her hips and straddled me, grinding against me like the practiced whore she was. As I struggled to get up, she pulled down the top of her dress, exposing her surgically enhanced breasts, and threw herself at me.

I managed to hold her back by gripping her shoulders, but she persisted in trying to mount me like I was some mark she could manipulate.

"Remember, Dominic, how much you used to crave my body? All the power games we played together? I know you remember." Nancy was speaking with a seductive voice that only disgusted me further. "Look at my new size. Aren't they perfect? A little gift from your dear father's connections. Don't you want to play with them like before?"

"Get off me, you diseased bitch!" Anxiety was building inside me. In the confined space of the car's backseat, I could barely move without giving her what she wanted.

"Oh, darling, just touch them, you'll remember why you kept me around." She grabbed my hand, attempting to place it on one of her silicon-enhanced tits.

I tried to avoid touching her contaminated flesh, but I needed to escape, and there was only one way—I had to make this snake believe I was interested.

"You know what, Nancy, you really want me to fuck you like the whore you are, don't you?" I asked, struggling to contain the homicidal fury in my voice.

"Yes. I'm dying to feel your body against mine again. And I know you want me too, not that boring little girl." She looked at me with lustful greed, thinking she had won.

"I'll fuck you, but you know I prefer to take my whores from behind like the animals they are." I saw her eyes light up with triumph—the plan was working perfectly.

"Finally! The Dominic I remember, ruthless and hungry for me. I'll make you forget that pathetic shopgirl forever."

With a victorious smile, she climbed off me and positioned herself. I waited for her to turn around on all fours like the bitch she was, then quickly stood up, got into my car, and peeled out of the garage. In my rearview mirror, I caught her hateful glare when she realized she'd been played by a master.

"What the hell was that?" I muttered to myself, punching the steering wheel hard enough to crack it. I would need to tell Gemma about this incident, and it would stress her out when she needed to stay calm for our heir's sake. But I had no choice—I couldn't risk Nancy doing what Beatrix had done and sending compromising photos to destroy my woman's trust again.

I drove straight to Caleb’s legitimate front company but decided to speak with Xavier before seeing Gemma. I told my consigliere about the absurd ambush in our family’s garage, and he agreed I needed to inform Gemma immediately.

"Brother, what about Beatrix?" Xavier asked, his hand resting on his concealed weapon.

"After the beating Gemma gave her, she disappeared into whatever hole spawned her, and I’m actually relieved about that," I replied.

"Then let Gemma handle Nancy the same way." Xavier laughed darkly at his own suggestion.

"Xavier, Gemma is carrying my heir!" I reminded him sharply. "Besides, Nancy isn’t some spoiled princess—she’s a venomous snake trained by my father’s enemies."

"True. We might need to handle this one ourselves..."

After strategizing with Xavier about potential threats, I went to find my woman. She was so engrossed in her financial work for Caleb’s operations that she didn’t notice my arrival; I had to call out to get her attention.

"My handsome! What brings the capo here?" She stood and came to give me a kiss that calmed my murderous thoughts.

"I came to escort you. We need to visit our police contacts to file charges against Marcus, and then we’re meeting Vincenzo at the shopping district to buy gifts for grandma," I explained, wrapping my arms protectively around her waist.

"Are you alright? You seem more tense than usual." Gemma studied my face with those perceptive eyes.

"Actually, something happened..." We sat down, and I told Gemma about Nancy’s pathetic ambush in the garage. By the time I finished, she was livid with protective rage.

"Tell me something, when you were born, did your mother coat you with honey instead of blessing you? For heaven's sake, I've never seen anything like this—these bitches swarm around you like vultures to fresh kill! It's exhausting being your woman." She was angry, but I found her possessive reaction so amusing I couldn't help but laugh.

"You tell me, what is it about me that, according to you, makes these whores target me?" I smiled wickedly at her.

"You arrogant bastard, you know you're devastatingly handsome for a killer," she said, making my smile grow wider with masculine pride.

"Don't be mad, I'm completely yours, body and soul!"

"I'm going to find that Nancy bitch and do worse than what I did to Beatrix."

"Gemma, you can't—you're carrying our heir, and I won't put our bloodline at risk. And Nancy isn't as naive as Beatrix; she knows how to fight dirty."

"You're right, I have to think about our baby first. I'll just have to wait until after I give birth before I destroy that parasite."

"Oh, my jealous queen! I love your fire! Come on, let's visit our contacts at the precinct. Daniel has already obtained the security footage from the jewelry store. Afterward, we'll meet Vincenzo at the mall. Carmen can't join us because she has ballet lessons. They're both excited about the family trip." I pulled her into my arms and gave her a possessive kiss that marked her as mine.

Chapter 344: Dangerous Family Encounter

Vincenzo's POV

"Sweetie, are you really planning to be away from me all weekend?" Brenda pouted, her arms wrapped tightly around my waist as she gazed up at me with those puppy dog eyes I could never resist.

"It’s just a couple of days, baby doll," I reassured her, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Your parents already arranged that countryside retreat for you. I’m only accompanying Uncle Dominic to meet Aunt Gemma’s grandmother for a family introduction, then I’ll be back before you even have time to miss me."

"Oh please, you two are absolutely nauseating!" Phoebe rolled her eyes dramatically at our display of affection.

Brenda shot her sister a playful glare. "That’s what happens when people are actually in love, sis."

"Right, of course!" Phoebe’s lips curled into a knowing smile.

We were killing time at the upscale shopping center’s central court, waiting for Uncle Dominic and Aunt Gemma to arrive. I’d invited Brenda along since we’d be apart for the weekend, and Phoebe had decided to tag along, claiming she needed to speak with my aunt about something important. The Thorne family’s security detail maintained a discreet perimeter around us, their presence barely noticeable to civilians but reassuring to me.

"What’s this mysterious conversation you need to have with Aunt Gemma?" I asked Phoebe, genuinely curious.

She crossed her arms defensively. "Not telling you. I know exactly how loose your lips are, Vincenzo! I haven’t forgotten how you spilled everything about Zander to my mom when she was conducting her usual background checks."

Great, my Carmen was pointing out my flaws too. As if I didn’t have enough people doing that already within our family’s inner circle.

"In my defense," I protested, "I had no idea it was supposed to be a secret. Your mom simply asked if you’d met anyone interesting lately during her routine security briefing. And Zander is, objectively speaking, an interesting guy who passed our preliminary screening."

"Sure, and being the absolute gentleman you are, you provided her with his entire family history and financial background. Now she won’t stop bugging me about arranging a formal meeting with proper

supervision." Phoebe had been furious with me after that incident. I'd had to buy her an obscene amount of expensive chocolates imported from Switzerland to earn her forgiveness.

"Well, what a delightful surprise!" A familiar voice that always set my teeth on edge interrupted our conversation. The voice that represented everything toxic about our family's past.

"Perfect. There goes our peaceful afternoon." I sighed heavily, immediately signaling to my security detail. "Marcus, why don't you find your own territory and pretend you never saw us?"

"Vincenzo, my dear grandson, is that any way to address your grandfather?" Marcus's smile never reached his eyes. The man was the definition of a snake – he'd never cared for our family until he needed something, and his exile from the Thorne organization hadn't humbled him one bit.

"You're not my grandfather in any way that matters," I said bluntly, my patience already wearing thin. "And you don't need to pretend you have any familial affection. We both know you despise everything our family stands for now."

"Such inappropriate behavior, grandson, especially in front of these lovely young ladies." Marcus's gaze lingered uncomfortably on Brenda and Phoebe, triggering every protective instinct bred into me from birth. I immediately positioned Brenda behind me and grabbed Phoebe's wrist, pulling her away from his reach while subtly alerting my detail.

"Don't even think about speaking to them," I growled, the family's dangerous reputation surfacing in my voice.

Phoebe looked confused by my reaction, while Brenda clung to my back, sensing the underlying threat that civilians couldn't fully comprehend.

"What's this nonsense, boy? Don't be ridiculous." Marcus focused on Phoebe with the calculating interest that made my blood run cold. "Allow me to introduce myself, miss. I'm Marcus Frost, Vincenzo's grandfather and former associate of this family's operations."

I pulled Phoebe even closer, ensuring he couldn't make any physical contact while my security team moved into position.

"Security!" I shouted, and thankfully, the armed detail my father had assigned to me immediately responded, approaching with the kind of efficiency that spoke to their military backgrounds. "Please remove this individual from our vicinity. He's been making inappropriate advances and violating his territorial restrictions."

"Vincenzo, stop being difficult," Marcus hissed, his mask of civility slipping to reveal the manipulative predator underneath. "I need to talk to you about family business. Your mother isn't answering my communications."

"That's your problem, not mine. I have no interest in discussing anything with someone who betrayed this family's trust." I turned my back on him, guiding the girls away while the security team efficiently handled the situation.

"Tell your mother to contact me, Vincenzo, or I'll make life very complicated for all of you," Marcus shouted as we walked away, his threats carrying the weight of someone who still had dangerous connections despite his exile.

I led the girls to a nearby upscale café where we settled into a private booth. As expected, Phoebe immediately bombarded me with questions, her journalistic instincts kicking in.

"What was that all about, Vincenzo?" she demanded, her voice lower now as she picked up on the serious undercurrents.

"That was my mother's father, Phoebe. He's a dangerous individual who was cast out of our family's business operations," I explained with a heavy sigh, choosing my words carefully.

"Is he the one who keeps harassing your household? The one who abandoned your grandmother for a woman half his age and tried to steal from the family accounts?"

"The very same," I confirmed grimly. "I need to ask something important of you – if you ever encounter him again, keep your distance and contact me immediately. Marcus is genuinely dangerous. Don't engage with him under any circumstances, and absolutely don't allow him anywhere near you without proper protection."

"Wow, you're describing him like he's some kind of criminal mastermind," Phoebe said, though her tone suggested she was beginning to understand the gravity of the situation.

"He's not quite that, but he might as well be given his connections and his complete lack of moral boundaries," I replied, dead serious.

"I can tell this isn't a joke. We'll stay away from him and follow security protocols," Phoebe promised, though her reassurance did little to ease my concern about Marcus's bold approach in such a public venue.

My encrypted phone buzzed with a message from Uncle Dominic saying they'd arrived at the shopping center. I quickly replied with our location, and it wasn't long before they joined us at the café, their own security detail seamlessly coordinating with mine.

"Hmm, I think I'll treat myself to their signature cappuccino," Aunt Gemma announced as she approached our table, her pregnancy glow making her look radiant despite the underlying tension I could sense. "How are you girls doing?"

"Gemma! We're fantastic! And so thrilled about the baby news!" Phoebe jumped up to hug my aunt before presenting her with a small, elegantly wrapped gift bag.

"What's this?" Aunt Gemma's eyes lit up with curiosity as she peeked inside, though I noticed Uncle Dominic's protective stance hadn't relaxed since their arrival.

She carefully removed a decorative box and opened it, her eyes instantly filling with tears. Inside was an exquisite white hand-knitted blanket, adorable booties, and a pompom beanie, all delicately adorned with satin ribbons and clearly made with extraordinary skill.

"Oh, Phoebe, this is absolutely beautiful!" Aunt Gemma exclaimed, her voice thick with emotion. "My baby's very first gift!"

"I hope I'm not overstepping any boundaries," Phoebe said hesitantly. "I assumed the little one would already have a fully stocked nursery by now, given your family's resources."

"Not at all," Uncle Dominic assured her with a warm smile, though his eyes continued to scan the area with practiced vigilance. "We've been taking our time with preparations. This was incredibly thoughtful of you."

"Gemma, my grandmother made it specially for you. She's incredibly talented with traditional crafts and creates the most beautiful pieces," Phoebe explained as Aunt Gemma enveloped her in another tight hug.

"I absolutely love it, Phoebe! Please give my heartfelt thanks to your grandmother," Aunt Gemma was genuinely moved by the gesture.

While the girls were distracted with the gift, I discreetly pulled Uncle Dominic aside to inform him about the unpleasant encounter with Marcus, keeping my voice low enough to avoid alarming the others.

"Vincenzo, you might want to consider avoiding this location for a while," Uncle Dominic suggested with concern, his expression darkening. "Marcus cornered Gemma here yesterday too, and his behavior is escalating beyond acceptable limits."

"What did that bastard do to her?" My blood immediately began to boil, the protective instincts that ran in our family flaring to life.

"He tried to grab her, but our security detail intervened before he could make contact. She's unharmed, but his boldness is becoming a serious problem," my uncle explained, his voice carrying the cold edge that made him so effective in family operations.

"I don't know if I should inform mom about these escalating incidents," I admitted. "She's been doing so well lately and returned from her business trip incredibly happy and relaxed."

"Let me speak with your grandmother first, and we'll decide how to approach this situation with her. Marcus's behavior suggests he's getting desperate, which makes him exponentially more dangerous."

I nodded in agreement, understanding the delicate balance required when dealing with family security matters. When we rejoined the others at the table, I noticed Phoebe sporting a satisfied smile that suggested her mysterious conversation with Aunt Gemma had gone well.

"So, did you discuss what you wanted with my aunt, Phoebe?" I asked, still desperate to uncover her secret, though I suspected it involved something related to her budding relationship with Zander.

"Yes, I did, Vincenzo," she replied smugly, blowing me a teasing kiss. "And before you ask, it's classified family business now."

She really wasn't going to tell me, and that only made me more curious about what kind of advice or assistance she'd sought from someone who'd successfully navigated the complex world of loving someone in our family's unique circumstances.

Chapter 345: Grandmas Dreams

Dominic's POV

After the incident with Vincenzo at the shopping district - where one of Marcus's remaining associates had been spotted tailing us through the family's territory - I knew I needed to brief my mother and Nadia and our security detail about Shelton' escalating surveillance attempts before our countryside trip. When I informed them about his latest breach of our perimeter, Nadia was absolutely livid. Since discovering his connection to the rival families trying to infiltrate our operations, she'd become fiercely protective, determined to keep that snake away from the children at all costs.

During our tactical meeting, I also shared details about the surprise I was orchestrating for Gemma. Despite my mother and Nadia's assurances that Gemma would be thrilled, I couldn't shake my nervousness. This meant everything to me, and in our world where a single mistake could be fatal, I wanted it to be flawless.

The week passed in careful preparation, and before I knew it, Saturday arrived. We departed early for the countryside in an armored convoy, heading to Gemma's grandmother's house outside our usual territory. Throughout the drive, Gemma was bubbling with excitement, chattering animatedly about her childhood visits to the only place that had ever felt like sanctuary. Her joy was infectious, making the tense journey through neutral ground feel lighter despite our armed escort trailing at a discrete distance.

By lunchtime, we pulled up to a beautiful colonial mansion that stood like a fortress of normalcy. Gemma practically leaped from the reinforced vehicle, dashing through the house until she found her grandmother in the kitchen. "Grandmaaa!" she exclaimed, wrapping the older woman in an enthusiastic embrace that reminded me how precious these moments of peace were in our violent world.

"Clair, my dear, I've missed you so much!" The petite woman with kind eyes returned Gemma's hug with equal fervor, oblivious to the fact that her granddaughter now lived under the protection of one of the city's most feared crime families.

When they finally separated, Gemma pulled her grandmother forward. "Grandma, I brought four very special people for you to meet. This is Dominic, my boyfriend. And these are Dominic's nephews, Vincenzo and Carmen. Everyone, this is my grandmother, Edith."

Edith welcomed us with the warmth only a grandmother could provide, her smile genuine as she ushered us to the dining table. Her eyes lingered on me with curiosity - probably wondering how a man like me had captured her granddaughter's heart. She greeted Willow and Ryder with familiar affection, Gemma's cousins having accompanied us on previous visits.

"Clair, my dear, where did you find this young man? He's quite a catch!" Edith winked, making me smile despite the weight of the Glock beneath my jacket. "And these children! They look like they stepped out of a magazine!"

"Grandma, what if I told you I met Dominic thanks to you?" Gemma said, settling into her chair while I remained alert to every sound from outside.

"Thanks to me?" Edith raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"I met him at the store where I bought your birthday present," Gemma explained, causing her grandmother to beam with delight. She had no idea that store was in the heart of our family's territory, where I'd been collecting protection money that fateful day.

"Well, a man of faith!" Edith nodded approvingly in my direction.

"A little bit," I admitted, thinking of the rosary my mother had given me before I took my first life for the family. "I was at the store buying a present for my mother; she has more faith than I do."

"Mothers always do," Edith replied wisely. "We ask God to protect you when we can't, and we have faith that He listens to us." Her words hit deeper than she knew, reminding me of my own mother's desperate prayers for my soul in this blood-soaked life.

Suddenly, Edith looked around the table. "Clair, where's the fourth person you mentioned? I've only counted three, and you said you brought four special people."

"Ah! The other person..." Gemma stood up, her eyes twinkling with excitement that made my chest tight with fierce protectiveness. "The other person, Grandma, is right here." She placed both hands gently on her still-flat stomach.

The room fell silent as Edith processed the news. Then, her hands flew to her face, tears welling in her eyes. She approached Gemma slowly, placing a trembling hand on her granddaughter's belly. Gemma began crying too, the moment more beautiful than anything I'd witnessed in the brutal underworld we inhabited.

"I can't believe you're giving me the joy of meeting my great-grandchild!" Edith exclaimed through happy tears. "I need to go out and buy wool to start knitting my great-grandchild's layette!"

We all burst into laughter at her enthusiasm, the sound foreign in my world of hushed conversations and coded warnings.

"Take it easy, Grandma," Gemma smiled. "There's plenty of time. I'm still in the early weeks."

"Time flies, sweetheart," Edith insisted. "After lunch, I'm heading to the craft store. I'm buying lots of blue yarn because I'm certain it's going to be a boy."

"How can you be so sure it's a boy, Grandma?" Gemma questioned with amusement.

"I can see it in your eyes, dear," Edith declared confidently. "And I never get it wrong."

"She was right about me and all my cousins," Willow confirmed, prompting Gemma to flash me an enormous smile that made every enemy I'd eliminated to keep her safe worth it.

After our delicious meal, Edith showed us to our rooms. The house was truly magnificent - a spacious colonial mansion with high ceilings and numerous rooms that our security team had already swept for threats. Its pristine white exterior was accented by blue double doors and windows, situated perfectly in the town center where we could monitor all approaches while appearing like any other visiting family.

True to her word, Edith soon prepared to visit the craft store. When Vincenzo and Carmen asked to join her, she was delighted. Vincenzo gallantly offered his arm - the boy's natural charm serving him well even at his young age - and the three set off at a leisurely pace, with Edith pointing out various landmarks while our discrete security detail shadowed them from strategic positions.

With Gemma napping due to pregnancy fatigue, I seized the opportunity to discuss my surprise plans with Willow and Ryder in the secured study. Their enthusiasm and willingness to help coordinate the logistics reinforced my confidence in this decision that would change everything.

When Edith returned with the children, they were laden with shopping bags and filled with laughter. Carmen had purchased her own yarn and needles, eager to learn knitting from Edith. I chuckled, knowing how determined my niece could be when she set her mind to something - we'd likely all receive handmade scarves before the next territory war broke out.

Edith and Carmen settled in to start their knitting lesson, but they were soon interrupted when Gemma awoke, requesting her grandmother's special fried doughnuts - what she affectionately called "grandma's dreams." Without hesitation, Edith bounded to the kitchen, her energy and love filling the house with a warmth that reminded me why some things were worth killing to protect.

Chapter 346: Blood Oath Proposal

Dominic's POV

I worked closely with Carmen to keep Gemma occupied, ensuring she stayed inside with her grandmother while we prepared everything under the cover of enhanced security protocols. Vincenzo had been invaluable, coordinating with our trusted soldiers to execute the plans Willow, Ryder and I had meticulously crafted for Gemma's surprise. The backyard of Edith's heavily fortified safe house was our

chosen location—a perfect sanctuary filled with vibrant flowers and cherished memories, now protected by our best men stationed at every entrance.

Time passed quickly as we transformed the space under the watchful eyes of our security detail. Willow had shared how this backyard held special significance for Gemma; it was where she'd spent countless childhood hours before the streets became too dangerous. Learning this only confirmed my choice was perfect for what could be our most vulnerable moment.

During our preparations, Edith pulled me aside into her private room, now equipped with panic buttons and bulletproof glass. Her eyes glistened with emotion as she discussed my intentions with the gravity of a mafia matriarch approving a union. Then, with trembling hands, she presented me with something that would make this blood oath even more meaningful. Her blessing overwhelmed me, and I embraced her, knowing I was gaining not just a grandmother-in-law, but a powerful family ally.

By evening, everything was ready. Edith's trusted housekeepers, all background-checked by our intelligence network, had prepared an exquisite dinner. The table settings sparkled under strategically placed lights that also served as additional security illumination. Throughout dinner, conversation flowed easily despite the underlying tension of our dangerous world, punctuated by laughter and carefully chosen stories.

As the main course concluded and before dessert arrived, I knew my moment had come. Rising from my seat, I commanded everyone's attention, my heart pounding against the bulletproof vest hidden beneath my formal shirt.

"Gemma," I began, my voice surprisingly steady despite knowing snipers from rival families would love nothing more than to disrupt this moment, "with everyone's help here, I've prepared something special for you. I wanted this moment to be shared with the two remarkable women who brought us together in this blood-soaked world—Edith and my mother." I gestured toward the encrypted tablet positioned on the table where my mother waited on our secure video line, her smile wide with anticipation from her protective location.

Vincenzo gave me a thumbs up, indicating that our private livestream to trusted family members across our territories was running. Our soldiers and allies from around the country were now watching, ready to witness what would bind our futures in the most sacred way our world understood.

"Gemma," I continued, looking directly into those fearless eyes that had stared down gun barrels and emerged victorious, "you make me the most powerful man alive every single day. Now you're carrying

our heir—the greatest blessing I could ever imagine. I never thought a man with blood on his hands deserved such overwhelming happiness."

"Oh, darling," Gemma responded, her eyes growing misty, "you make me feel like the most protected woman in this dangerous world too!"

Taking a deep breath, I reached into my jacket pocket, past the concealed weapon that never left my side. "Gemma, I love you more than I ever thought possible for someone in our line of work. I've waited my entire violent life for you." My hands trembled slightly as I withdrew two small boxes. Kneeling beside her chair, I opened the blue velvet one first, knowing this moment made us vulnerable but willing to risk everything.

"Before you, my life was empty—days filled with blood and business deals I can barely remember now. From the moment you challenged me on my own territory, my soul recognized yours, creating a bond stronger than any family loyalty. I want to call you my wife, I want you to bear my name with all the protection it provides, and I want your face to be both my first sight every morning and my last vision every night." The diamond ring sparkled like the city lights over our territory. "Gemma Valance, would you do me the extraordinary honor of becoming Mrs. Gemma Frost, my partner in this dangerous life?"

"You... you..." Gemma stammered, tears streaming freely down her face. "Are you asking me to take a blood oath with you?"

"Yes, my Songbird," I confirmed, my voice thick with emotion and the weight of what this meant in our world. "I want to be your husband and protector for the rest of our lives. Will you marry me and share my name, my power, and my enemies?"

For a terrifying moment that felt like standing in sniper crosshairs, she couldn't speak through her tears, just threw herself into my arms. As her crying subsided, she pulled back slightly, her hand caressing my scarred cheek as she gazed into my eyes.

"Dominic," she finally said, "I would be honored to become Mrs. Gemma Frost, but most importantly, I'll enjoy showing off my dangerous husband and watching all those scheming women run for their lives." Her teasing broke the emotional tension, causing everyone to laugh despite the gravity of our world.

With slightly unsteady hands, I slid the engagement ring onto her finger—a symbol that would mark her as untouchable to every criminal in the city. Then, I opened the second box—the small black one Edith had entrusted to me earlier. Gemma gasped, looking between me and her grandmother in disbelief.

"These are my grandparents' wedding bands," she whispered, her voice filled with awe. "But, Grandma..."

Edith rose from her seat, tears glistening in her eyes, and placed her weathered hand over our joined ones with the solemnity of a mafia blessing.

"I've treasured these rings since the day I married, Clair. My marriage brought me incomparable happiness despite the dangers we faced. Nothing would honor me more than seeing my only granddaughter marry wearing these symbols of loyalty stronger than death. They brought me joy and protection, and I wish the same for you, sweetheart."

"I've dreamed of this my whole life, Grandma," Gemma whispered, tears flowing freely as she embraced her grandmother tightly. "Thank you for trusting me with something so precious." She pulled back, her hands shaking as she looked at the delicate bands. "I promise to honor their legacy and the love they represent."

With infinite care, I slid her grandfather's wedding band onto Gemma's trembling finger, sealing our bond with the weight of family history and unbreakable promises. She took my left hand, sliding her grandmother's wedding band onto my ring finger with reverent precision.

Gemma's emotion was contagious, spreading through everyone present. These rings represented everything I promised her—unwavering loyalty, deadly protection, absolute faithfulness, and a household that would kill for her safety.

The garden erupted with applause and cheerful whistles from our security team. Ryder delivered an elaborate toast with all the ceremony our dangerous world deserved. As I held my fiancée close under the starlit sky, surrounded by armed guards and loved ones, I knew with absolute certainty that no man—criminal or otherwise—had ever been happier than I was at this perfect, heavily protected moment.

Chapter 347: Dogs Defend Daughter

Nadia's POV

Sometimes I wonder what actually goes on in my brother's mind when he's not busy running the family's money laundering operations. Dominic seems to completely lose his focus at the most inopportune moments, especially when children are involved. I had given him clear, straightforward instructions – one dog, just one small dog – yet when I returned from my delightful vacation in the Hamptons and collected my children, they came back with two dogs. And Carmen's dog was nearly her size! I was tempted to send both the canines and my children straight back to his heavily fortified estate.

Naturally, Dominic had prepared a persuasive explanation when I called him in a fury about the two dogs. The frustrating part is that he convinced me – he always did. Since childhood, it had been this way, even before we understood the weight of our family name in the underworld. I ended up doing whatever he wanted. My children, those little masterminds, knew exactly how to manipulate their uncle, the feared Capo of the Thorne organization, to get their way. By extension, I felt manipulated too, because after Dominic surrendered to their wishes, he somehow made me cave in to his desire to please his niece and nephew.

I reluctantly took my little troublemakers home to our compound with their two furry companions. Surprisingly, the smaller dog turned out to be a whirlwind of energy and mess, while the larger one was completely serene, quiet, and well-behaved. Still, I was determined not to let my home descend into chaos, especially when maintaining appearances was crucial to our family's legitimate business facade.

What caught me off guard was how quickly these two furry creatures stole my heart. The sneaky pair worked their way in gradually – following me around the secured mansion, resting at my feet when I read classified reports, attentively listening when I spoke to them during my encrypted phone calls, and greeting me enthusiastically when I returned home from managing our front companies. Truthfully, they gave me more attention than my own children did. Not that I would ever admit I'd fallen for these fuzzballs. I even bought special imported treats that I kept hidden in my private study, saving them for moments when it was just the three of us at home.

I was in the middle of secretly treating Popcorn and Caviar when a security guard informed me through the intercom that my father was at the compound's main gate, demanding to speak with me. The irony wasn't lost on me – the man expelled from the Thorne family for his betrayal now stood outside the very gates he once walked through with respect. I instructed the guard to let him in and remained where I was. In truth, I had wanted to confront him since the day he cornered Vincenzo at the mall, but Gerard had persuaded me to let it go, citing family politics and the delicate balance of power in our world. Now, however, I would meet him, and he would certainly get an earful.

"Daughter! I've missed you terribly! I'm so relieved I could reach you. I'm desperate and need your help," he declared, entering my living room with outstretched arms approaching me. The sight of him in his cheapened clothing, so different from the tailored suits he once wore as a respected member of our organization, made my stomach turn. I immediately stepped backward.

"Don't touch me!" I warned sharply, hearing the dogs growl behind me in a way that reminded me of the guard dogs we kept at our warehouses.

"Nadia, what is this? Don't treat your father this way. Daughter, I'm going through an extremely difficult time," he scolded with a whining undertone that would have gotten him killed in front of any respectable family head.

"My father? I don't recognize you as that anymore," I replied with a cold, brief laugh that carried all the ice our family was known for in business negotiations. "And you're simply facing the consequences of your own actions – consequences Dominic was too merciful to fully impose."

"Nadia, I can see Dominic has been poisoning your mind with falsehoods about the family business. Believe me, daughter, nothing he told you is true. Dominic has always resented me because you were always my favorite, daddy's little princess, even before he became the family's right hand." Marcus spoke rapidly, his desperation evident, making me want to strike him the way Dominic had taught me during our childhood self-defense lessons.

"Nothing is true? Are you referring to the women you abused, or perhaps that tramp Nancy, whom I recently discovered was your son's girlfriend before you stole her while he was building his reputation in the organization?"

My voice trembled with rage and pain, the kind of controlled fury that made enemies of our family think twice before crossing us.

"Sweetheart, Nancy was just a momentary lapse of judgment during a difficult transition period."

"Don't call me sweetheart. I AM NOT YOUR DAUGHTER!" I screamed, tears springing to my eyes. I noticed Popcorn and Caviar positioning themselves protectively in front of me, their instincts as sharp as our trained security personnel.

"Nadia, you can’t judge me. I was an excellent father to you, even while serving the family’s interests!"

"Were you really, Dad?" My tone dripped with the kind of cynicism Dominic used during interrogations. "Were you an excellent father when you harassed my teenage friend during a family gathering? Or perhaps when you attempted to assault one of my bridesmaids at my wedding, embarrassing us in front of allied families? Maybe you were excellent when you blackmailed my mother and threatened to exploit my fragility to drive me to suicide, compromising family security? No, I know! You were excellent when you stole your son’s girlfriend and abandoned your household for that gold-digging tramp, bringing shame to our name."

"Nadia, you don’t understand the complexities of family politics and business pressures..." I cut him off before he could continue.

"Save it, Marcus! You have no control over me anymore! I only allowed you past our security today to issue a warning, so listen carefully: stay away from me and my household, don’t approach my children on the street, don’t attempt to speak to them, don’t even look at them. If you come near them, Marcus, I will kill you myself. Do you understand? I WILL KILL YOU!" Fury had completely overtaken me, the Frost family rage burning through my veins.

"You worthless thing! Who do you think you are to address me this way? Want the truth? You were only valuable as long as you could persuade that idiot Dominic to give me money from the family coffers. Now, you’re useless to me." Marcus’s mask slipped, revealing the desperate, bitter man he’d become since his expulsion from our world. "But I won’t leave empty-handed."

He moved toward me with the kind of threatening posture that would have earned him a bullet in any other context, but before he could touch me, both dogs intervened, each one sinking their teeth into one of his legs. Marcus panicked immediately.

"Oww! You mangy mutts! Let go of me! HELP, MAKE THESE STUPID ANIMALS RELEASE ME!" Rage poured from his voice as blood from the dog bites stained my Italian marble floor.

"SECURITY!" I shouted, and two armed guards promptly entered, their hands instinctively moving toward their concealed weapons. "Remove this scum from my property, and if he appears again, call the police and inform Dominic immediately. Caviar, Popcorn, release this piece of trash!"

The dogs instantly obeyed, positioning themselves beside me, sitting but still growling at Marcus with the same protective instinct our family's enforcers showed toward threats. As that contemptible man was escorted out by security, likely never to approach our compound again, I knelt down and thanked my four-legged defenders. They certainly earned extra treats that day, and perhaps a mention to Dominic about upgrading our household security protocols.

Chapter 348: Wedding Under Fire

Gemma's POV

The weekend at my grandmother's house had exceeded all my expectations. Dominic's proposal caught me completely off guard, and I couldn't have imagined anything more perfect. I'd never been the type to fantasize about white dresses or fairy tale ceremonies, but now with this gorgeous blood diamond on my finger, I found myself bubbling with excitement about our mafia wedding.

"I'm actually engaged to a Capo," I whispered to myself, admiring the stunning crimson stone on my hand as I stood in our heavily secured walk-in closet.

"Yes, Songbird, you are." Dominic's powerful arms encircled my waist from behind, pulling me against his chest as his lips brushed the top of my head. "And I want to set a date for our blood vows."

I'd been so lost in my daydreams that I hadn't heard him enter through the reinforced door. He was already dressed for family business in that charcoal suit that made his emerald eyes pop even more dramatically, the concealed shoulder holster visible beneath his jacket. Meanwhile, I was still wrapped in my silk bathrobe, completely distracted by the sparkle of my engagement ring.

"What do you think about soon?" I suggested.

"Too long," he complained, his lips finding the sensitive spot on my neck where he'd once marked me as his territory.

I shook my head firmly. "I don't want to rush into anything like what happened with Ivy's emergency ceremony when the rival families were closing in. Taking our time gives us perfect timing to secure all the family alliances." My tone made it clear I wasn't willing to negotiate a shorter timeframe that might compromise our safety.

"Fine," he conceded with a sigh. "What kind of ceremony are you thinking? Something grand with all the family heads present?"

"Actually, no. Something intimate with just our inner circle and trusted soldiers." I had a specific vision forming, though I wasn't sure how he'd respond to it given the security concerns.

"You've already planned it all out in your head, haven't you?" Dominic caught my eyes in the bulletproof mirror reflection, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Sort of... if you agree to the security arrangements..." I turned to face him. "I'd love to exchange vows on the beach at sunset."

His face lit up with a radiant smile. "You really do love the sea! That sounds perfect. Quentin has a gorgeous fortified beach compound not far from here. If you'd like, we could have the ceremony on the private sand and the reception at the main house with full perimeter security."

"I love that idea! I'll talk to Nadia about coordinating with the family."

"If you need additional protection details, just let me know."

I laughed. "Just make sure you show up armed and say 'I do.'"

He shook his head playfully, and my heart swelled with joy. I was truly happy. Since I'd started turning off my encrypted phone at night per Dominic's security protocols, I'd been sleeping much better and feeling refreshed each morning. I made plans to meet the girls at the Social Union's private dining room after work, hoping they'd help me organize the wedding. I'd invited Nadia to join us as well.

When we gathered at the underground club's restaurant, the girls immediately grabbed my hand, examining the engagement ring from every angle while staying alert to our surroundings. We were giggling like schoolgirls despite the armed bodyguards stationed discreetly around our table. Nadia arrived shortly after with her own security detail, and they all launched into animated wedding planning discussions.

"Ladies, please calm down," I laughed at their enthusiasm. "I already have some ideas, so just listen for a moment."

"Here we go," Zoe groaned dramatically while checking her concealed weapon. "I bet you're going to tell us you're just heading to the courthouse with a justice of the peace under witness protection."

"No, Zo, we're having an actual ceremony," I assured her. "But something small with just close associates and trusted soldiers." Zoe pouted visibly. "On the beach," I added.

"Oh my God, what a fantastic idea, Gemma!" Nadia exclaimed supportively. "Dominic loves the sea, and it's easier to secure than an indoor venue!"

"So do I, Nadia. And he mentioned you have a beautiful fortified beach compound..."

Nadia didn't even let me finish. "It's perfect! Consider it yours! Do whatever you want with it!" Her eyes sparkled with excitement. "I'm so touched that my little brother is having his blood ceremony at my property! We should spend a weekend there so you can see the security setup and plan accordingly."

"Dominic's actually giving you time to organize the wedding?" Ivy looked astonished. "Seems like Caleb was the impatient one when a rival family was threatening war."

"Don't complain, Ivy. You loved every minute of that adrenaline rush," Zoe teased, and Ivy nodded in agreement.

"We're planning for soon," I explained. "Nadia, do you think we could arrange for a priest to perform the ceremony? I'd really like to do it at sunset with the family's blessing."

"Gemma, leave that to my mother. She'll definitely secure the priest through her connections," Nadia replied, genuinely delighted by our plans.

"Well, look here, Elza. The mafia wives club is having a meeting," Beatrix interrupted, approaching our table with Elza in tow, both clearly having bribed their way past security. Her face still bore the marks of

our last encounter; not even professional makeup could completely conceal the damage I'd inflicted during our territorial dispute. I smiled, feeling rather proud of my handiwork.

"Zoe, I think the enemy informant enjoyed her beating so much she came back for seconds," I remarked casually while noting the positions of our guards.

"And she brought her little accomplice to get eliminated too," Zoe added, her hand moving instinctively toward her concealed blade.

"You're both trashy, low-class, psychotic killers!" Beatrix seethed, but her opinion meant nothing to me—nobody threatens what belongs to the family.

"Listen carefully, rat," I said, my patience waning as I adopted the deadly calm Dominic had taught me. "You and your associate need to forget we exist, and forget about our men too. Better yet, forget about my soon-to-be husband!" I emphasized each word, making sure this insufferable woman understood that Dominic was bound to me by blood oath.

"Husband? What delusion is this?" Beatrix looked genuinely confused and increasingly desperate.

"Here, let me spell it out for you," I raised my hand, flaunting my ring while signaling our security. "Dominic proposed with a blood diamond, and we're exchanging vows soon! Wonderful news, isn't it?"

"You gold-digging whore! You won't marry Dominic—he belongs to me, he always has been! Even if I have to put a bullet in you, this ceremony won't happen." Beatrix's eyes blazed with uncontrolled rage, her hand twitching toward what was likely a concealed weapon.

"You won't do anything, you traitorous bitch! Crawl back to whatever rival family is stupid enough to shelter you." Zoe stood up intimidatingly, her own weapon now clearly visible. "Disappear before I paint this floor with your blood again."

"Come on, Bridget, these women are completely unhinged!" Elza pulled her friend away by the arm, both clearly rattled by the deadly atmosphere.

"This wedding isn't happening. You can bet your life on that," Beatrix threatened before finally retreating under the watchful eyes of our armed guards.

"I don't like that snake," Nadia commented once they'd left. "Dominic told me you really demolished her face during the territory dispute. Girl, even professional makeup couldn't hide it." She erupted in laughter.

"Nadia, you should have seen it—it was absolutely vicious!" Zoe recounted with glee.

We filled Nadia in on all the details of my confrontation with Beatrix, and she laughed until tears streamed down her face. But something was nagging at me. "Girls, where's Nora?" I asked suddenly.

"Oh, Gemma, Nora had to leave town today. Her father suffered a heart attack, and she had to rush to be with him. She sends her love," Zoe explained.

"What happened to her father? And why did she need to leave so suddenly?" I questioned, finding the timing suspicious given recent threats.

"Apparently it's cardiac-related and quite serious. She's not sure how long she'll be there, so she resigned from Caleb's organization," Zoe elaborated.

"Xavier's worried Jude might request a transfer too, but he's assured us he's staying loyal to the family, at least for now," Ivy added, clearly in the loop about personnel security.

"I hope everything works out safely. I'll have Dominic check on her security tomorrow," I said thoughtfully.

When I arrived home that evening, I found Dominic in the living room reviewing family business documents with Amber sleeping peacefully at his feet. He immediately pulled me onto his lap and peppered my face with kisses, making me feel like the most protected woman in the dangerous world we inhabited.

Chapter 349: Past Calls Again

Gemma’s POV

"My goddess, I’ve been dying to see you! I missed you terribly," Dominic whispered between passionate kisses as I settled into his lap in the leather chair of his private office, feeling instantly safe in the arms of Thorne family’s most feared Capo.

"I missed you too," I admitted, nestling closer against his warm chest beneath the expensive suit jacket. "But I had an amazing time with the girls."

His fingers traced lazy patterns on my back, careful of the concealed holster he’d insisted I wear. "So what’s the next adventure on your schedule?"

"We’re planning a weekend at Nadia’s safe house by the coast soon," I replied, watching his expression carefully.

A small frown creased his brow, the same look he wore during family meetings. "Just you ladies, or...?"

I laughed, placing a kiss on the corner of his mouth. "All of us, handsome. I couldn’t bear a whole weekend without my dangerous protector."

His eyes lit up with that predatory gleam I’d grown to love. "Now that’s what I like to hear." He paused, a mischievous glint appearing. "So, are we finally having that blood oath ceremony this weekend?"

"It’s still some time away, Dominic," I reminded him with a playful eye roll.

"Fine, I’ll wait," he conceded dramatically. "But until then, why don’t we practice for the honeymoon?" His nose traced a tantalizing path along my neck, sending shivers down my spine. "I’ve been aching to lose myself in you."

"Are you reading my thoughts?" I asked breathlessly.

His smile was pure sin, the same dangerous expression that made rival families tremble. "Come here, future wife. Our bed is calling."

He helped me to my feet and turned to Amber, his loyal German Shepherd trained for both protection and detection work. "Sorry buddy, you're staying downstairs tonight." The dog let out a dramatic whimper that had me laughing all the way upstairs to his heavily secured penthouse bedroom.

When we reached the bedroom, I gestured toward the bathroom. "I should shower first."

"A shower sounds perfect," Dominic agreed, but his actions contradicted his words as he gently guided me to sit on the bed. "But first..."

He began removing his clothes with deliberate slowness, holding my gaze the entire time. I settled back, content to enjoy the show. The shoulder holster came off first, the deadly weapon placed carefully on the nightstand within easy reach. Then his fingers worked each button of his tailored shirt, revealing his sculpted chest marked with scars from his dangerous lifestyle, inch by tantalizing inch. Every movement was natural yet somehow calculated to drive me wild.

His shirt joined the holster on the nightstand, followed by his Italian leather shoes. When his fingers moved to his pants, my breath caught. He slid them down those powerful legs that had carried him through countless territory wars, leaving him in just black boxer briefs that did nothing to hide how much he wanted me. When those came off too, I couldn't help licking my lips at the magnificent sight of my deadly lover.

Dominic noticed my reaction and stroked himself slowly, making my mouth water. He approached, threading his fingers through my hair. "What do you want, my goddess?"

"As if you don't know exactly what I want," I replied with a smile.

"I do," he admitted, his voice carrying that commanding tone that made subordinates obey instantly. "But I want to hear you say it."

My eyes sparkled with desire. "I want you in my mouth. Right now."

"But what about that shower?" he teased.

"Later," I insisted, pulling him by the hips directly to my waiting mouth.

I started with just the tip, savoring the taste of my dangerous man's excitement. My eyes locked with his as I licked along his entire length, making him slick and ready. His appreciative moans only encouraged me further.

Taking him fully into my mouth, I established a rhythm that had his breathing quickening. One hand matched my mouth's movements while the other caressed him intimately. Dominic's eyes never left mine, his pleasure evident in every sound he made.

As I sensed his approaching climax, I increased my pace. His moans grew louder, his scarred skin hot beneath my touch.

"Gemma, I'm going to—" he panted, struggling to form words. "I'm going to finish."

I held him firmly as he reached his peak, accepting everything he gave me with pleasure. When I was done, I deliberately licked away a drop from my chin and put my finger in my mouth, maintaining eye contact the entire time.

"Woman, you're an insatiable tease," Dominic growled, pulling me up for a fierce kiss that claimed me completely with the same intensity he used to claim territory.

He stood me up and began removing my clothes with considerably less patience than he'd shown with his own.

"Damn, why are there so many buttons?" he muttered, frustrated with my blouse. "I hope you're not too attached to this." Without waiting for an answer, he tore it open, sending buttons scattering across the floor. My bra quickly followed. He pushed my skirt up around my waist and tumbled me onto the bed, removing my underwear in one swift motion.

With the same urgency, his mouth found my center, already wet with desire for my dangerous protector. His tongue worked magic, licking and sucking with precision while his hands caressed my breasts. Each touch sent waves of pleasure through me, building a delicious tension that had me moaning shamelessly.

Dominic knew my body better than I knew it myself, effortlessly finding every sensitive spot with the same expertise he used to read his enemies' weaknesses. My pleasure built to an overwhelming crescendo until I arched off the bed, crying out as ecstasy washed over me. He didn't stop, continuing to taste every drop of my release until I was trembling with need again.

He removed my skirt completely before covering my body with his. I pulled him closer, wrapping my legs around him as he kissed his way up my body, from my breasts to my neck, finally capturing my mouth in a deep, passionate kiss. When he entered me at last, it felt like finding sanctuary in the most dangerous man's arms.

Every time with Dominic was transcendent. Each thrust brought me closer to paradise, his hands roaming my body possessively while his kisses consumed me. I surrendered completely to the sensation, feeling another climax building and then breaking over me in powerful waves. Dominic followed moments later with a deep groan against my neck.

Carefully withdrawing, he collapsed beside me, both of us breathless and sated. I turned to curl against his chest, content in his embrace as he held me close, a satisfied smile on his face.

I drifted off in my lethal lover's arms, perfectly happy. But sometime later, an insistent ringing jerked me from sleep. I woke disoriented in the darkness, Dominic's muscled arm still heavy around my waist.

The ringing continued. My phone. I reluctantly extracted myself from Dominic's protective embrace as he stirred and turned on the bedside lamp, his hand instinctively moving toward his weapon.

Fumbling for my purse, I located the persistently ringing device and answered.

All I could hear was breathing—heavy, intentional breathing. I waited, growing increasingly uncomfortable. I'd been getting these calls for a while now. Just as I was about to hang up, a laugh came through the speaker—a distinctive, hateful laugh that I recognized instantly.

The phone suddenly felt toxic in my hand. I threw it to the floor and stumbled backward, trembling as tears filled my eyes. The past I thought Dominic's protection had buried had found me again.

Chapter 350: Midnight Terror Call

Gemma's POV

I watched Dominic bolt upright in bed, his muscled frame tense as he lunged for the phone that had clattered to the hardwood floor of his penthouse. The secured line that connected directly to Thorne family communications had been ringing, but by the time he managed to grab it, whoever had been on the other end had already disconnected. My body trembled uncontrollably as he turned back to me, his powerful arms immediately encircling my shoulders in a protective embrace.

"Gemma, what exactly did you hear?" Dominic's voice carried that familiar edge of controlled violence, though his touch remained gentle. His emerald eyes searched mine with the intensity of a man who had spent years reading threats in the shadows.

"He was laughing," I managed between ragged breaths, my chest heaving as panic coursed through my veins. "I heard that sick laugh of his."

"Who was it, baby? Do you recognize the voice?" Dominic's grip tightened imperceptibly, and I could feel the dangerous energy radiating from him like heat from a furnace.

"It was Nick." Speaking his name aloud sent waves of nausea through my stomach. Even here, in the fortified sanctuary of Dominic's private residence, that bottom-feeder could still reach me.

Dominic's expression hardened into the cold mask I'd seen him wear during family business. "What did that piece of street trash say to you?"

"Nothing concrete this time. Just like the other calls—heavy breathing at first—but then came that laugh." I shuddered at the memory, knowing that sound would haunt my dreams. "I'd know that psychotic laugh anywhere, Dominic. It's definitely Nick."

"Breathe slowly," he commanded, reaching for my personal cell phone on the nightstand. "I'm shutting this down immediately. First thing tomorrow morning, I'm briefing Daniel on this escalation. And Gemma, we're getting you a completely new number through family channels."

I nodded frantically, relief already beginning to seep through my terror. "Yes, that sounds perfect. The sooner the better."

"Consider it handled." Dominic's voice carried the absolute certainty of a man who commanded respect through fear and violence. He guided me back against the silk pillows with surprising tenderness. "Now I want you to get comfortable while I make you something to help you relax."

After tucking the Egyptian cotton sheets around me and pressing a lingering kiss to my forehead, Dominic disappeared from the master bedroom. When he returned, he carried an elegant silver tray bearing a steaming cup of tea and expensive imported cookies from the Italian bakery that exclusively served Thorne family establishments. Amber, Dominic's massive German Shepherd trained for both companionship and protection, padded into the room behind him and approached the bed, nudging my arm with his cold nose. Despite everything, the dog's gentle presence managed to coax a small smile from me.

"There's that beautiful smile I fell in love with," Dominic said, settling the tray beside me and placing the warm porcelain cup in my hands.

The tea was perfectly prepared—lightly sweetened with just enough chamomile to calm my frayed nerves without making me drowsy. After finishing the drink and nibbling on several of the delicate cookies, I curled onto my side. Dominic slipped into bed behind me, his large frame molding against mine as he pulled me close against his chest. Surrounded by his protective warmth and the knowledge that armed guards patrolled the building's perimeter, I finally managed to fall into a dreamless sleep.

The following afternoon, a courier from Zenith Systems delivered a brand-new encrypted smartphone to my desk at the Thorne family's legitimate investment firm. The device had already been programmed with security protocols that would make it impossible for anyone outside the organization to trace or intercept my communications. I felt an enormous wave of relief knowing that Nick's harassment had been effectively blocked, though one troubling question continued to gnaw at me: how had a lowlife street thug managed to obtain my private number in the first place?

Around mid-afternoon, my office door opened to reveal Lila carrying a familiar container of homemade cookies. This weekly ritual had become one of the few normal aspects of my increasingly complicated

life. Every few days, she would arrive with fresh baked goods for our coffee break, giving us time to catch up away from the dangerous world I'd been drawn into.

"Gemma, I still cannot believe that worthless scumbag Nick has become such a massive threat to your safety," Lila said, her voice rising with genuine outrage as she settled into the leather chair across from my mahogany desk.

I sighed deeply, selecting a chocolate chip cookie from the container. "I know, Lila. I just don't comprehend men who think they own women and can dictate every aspect of our lives."

"That's classic behavior for weak, cowardly men," she replied, dunking her cookie into her espresso. "Pathetic individuals who care about nothing except having their unreasonable demands satisfied."

"It runs much deeper than simple selfishness, my friend. These toxic, controlling attitudes get passed down through generations like some kind of poisonous inheritance that society refuses to address properly."

"You're absolutely correct about that." Lila nodded grimly, her expression darkening. "Thank God Dominic and Daniel are handling the situation with the resources they have access to. But you know what really infuriates me? Some mothers actually raise their sons to behave this way. My own mother, for example—she's exactly the type who believes men should dominate everything and can treat women however they see fit."

I could hear the deep disappointment in Lila's voice. Her relationship with her mother had always been troubled, but I sensed that wasn't her only current source of stress.

"Lila, how are things progressing with Daniel?" I asked carefully, noting the tension in her shoulders.

"Still incredibly strange, honestly." She sighed heavily, her posture sagging with exhaustion. "He's been acting more distant than usual lately, and that's saying something."

"Have you considered having a direct conversation with him about what you're observing?"

"I keep trying to work up the courage to confront him." Her expression crumpled slightly, and she looked at me with uncertainty clouding her eyes. "Gemma, do you think Zander would consider renting me a room in his apartment?"

The unexpected question caught me completely off guard. "Why are you asking about that possibility, Lila?"

"Because I'm starting to think Daniel wants to end our relationship, but he feels awkward about it since I'm currently living in his place. He probably assumes I have nowhere else to go—which is technically accurate at the moment, but I'll figure out alternative arrangements."

"Don't be ridiculous, Lila!" I reached across the desk to squeeze her hand reassuringly. "You absolutely have somewhere to go. My home is always available to you, and Zander would welcome you without hesitation. But honestly, I don't believe Daniel wants to break up with you. The way that man looks at you doesn't suggest someone who's planning to end things."

"I wish I could be certain of that, Gemma." Lila's eyes began to glisten with unshed tears. "He's been acting so strangely. Disappearing at odd hours for mysterious meetings. I just don't know what to think anymore."

"Lila, remember that he's a detective working very sensitive cases. His job involves tremendous stress and dangerous situations. Maybe he's dealing with a particularly challenging investigation that's requiring longer hours than usual."

"Maybe you're right," she whispered, though the doubt in her voice remained unmistakable.

I watched as tears threatened to spill from Lila's eyes. She had invested her entire heart in her relationship with Daniel, had fallen completely in love with him despite the dangerous world he operated in, and would be devastated if things fell apart. But something deep inside me refused to believe that was happening. Daniel adored her, didn't he? He certainly made it appear that way whenever I observed them together. Nevertheless, I remained prepared to support my friend through whatever challenges might lie ahead.