Mafia Mask 351

Chapter 351: Venomous Encounter

Gemma's POV

My coffee meeting with Lila had been a pleasant respite from the constant tension that came with working within the Thorne family's legitimate operations. But returning to the Zenith Trust offices brought an unexpected interruption that made my blood run cold. Late afternoon, as I was reviewing money transfer reports for overseas accounts, the front desk called through the secure line. Someone was waiting in the lobby, demanding to speak with me despite having no appointment and no clearance to enter the building.

I exhaled slowly, wondering what fresh hell had decided to visit me today. Recent months had brought enough unwanted attention from Dominic's enemies and my own past mistakes. Better to handle this directly before it escalated into something that required the family's more violent intervention methods. I informed security I would handle the situation personally, making it crystal clear this visitor was not to be allowed past the lobby under any circumstances.

When I stepped into the marble-floored reception area, I immediately spotted her lounging in one of the leather armchairs positioned near the bulletproof windows. Nancy. Even from across the room, everything about her screamed dangerous opportunist. She wore a white dress made of material so thin it left nothing to the imagination, cut scandalously short with a neckline that plunged practically to her navel. The woman looked like she belonged in some mob boss's private club, not in our carefully maintained legitimate business front.

"I'm wondering what you could possibly have to say to me, Nancy?" I asked, not bothering to mask my irritation as I approached her position.

She looked me up and down with obvious disdain, her calculating eyes taking inventory like I was merchandise. "Gemma! You really are quite exotic, aren't you?"

I maintained my composure, flashing a cold smile that would have made any professional proud. "Did you come here just to look at me? Oh, sweetheart, looking is free, but touching will cost you more than you can afford to pay."

"You think you're untouchable now, don't you, Gemma! But I came here to give you some friendly advice," she replied with the kind of confidence that only came from backing by dangerous people.

"Advice? I don't recall asking for any," I shot back with a mocking glance. "You know what they say about advice from vipers, honey, it usually comes with poison attached."

"Hmm," she responded with a malicious smile that sent warning bells through my head. "But I'll share it anyway. I heard that Marcus has taken an interest in you, so why don't you go for him instead? He's not completely worthless, he'll do well enough for someone like you. But Dominic, sweetie, he belongs with his own kind. He's going to be mine again."

I nearly laughed at the sheer delusion. Marcus Frost was exiled scum who had betrayed his own family, and this woman thought I should settle for Dominic's disgraced father? "Wow! We have a fortune teller here! Why don't you predict when the Feds will finally catch up with your current sugar daddy while you're at it? In what parallel universe do you think Dominic will ever look at you again? Please, enlighten me."

"Oh, dear little Gemma!" she purred with false sweetness.

That form of address made my skin crawl. Only one person had ever called me that, and hearing it from this poisonous creature's mouth made my trigger finger itch for the weapon I had learned to carry.

"Don't call me that!" I snapped, my professional mask slipping for just a moment, something she clearly noticed and savored.

"I'm warning you because I still have some mercy left in me. Dominic, darling, has always been obsessed with me, completely devoted. He was absolutely destroyed when I chose to explore other opportunities, cried like a child, and never seriously involved himself with anyone else until you crawled out of whatever gutter you came from. I understand the appeal, you're quite different from our usual circle, and he got curious about slumming it. But now I'm back in town, and he'll return to where he belongs, it's simply inevitable. So make this easier on yourself and step aside now, you'll suffer considerably less that way."

The conviction in her voice was almost impressive, if it wasn’t so completely divorced from reality. I had to give her credit for one thing: the woman had unshakeable self-delusion, even when facing someone protected by the most dangerous family in the city.

"Listen here, you parasite, don’t be so delusional! When you abandoned Dominic in the past, yes, he suffered, after all, you left his household in ruins and his reputation damaged. But now, sweetheart, he doesn’t even waste energy despising you. You generate absolutely no emotion in him whatsoever. You’re like a disease, we only remember you exist when you show up to infect something, and when we see you, we just feel disgusted."

Her eyes flashed with genuine anger, the mask of sweetness finally cracking. "You have no idea who you’re crossing, little Gemma. There are consequences in this world for people who forget their place."

"Neither do you, Little Parasite!" I replied with the kind of cynical smile I had learned from experience. I turned and signaled to Hunter, our head of security, a former military man who had found profitable employment with the family. "Hunter, please escort this pest from the premises. I don’t want to waste the energy required to deal with her myself. And make sure everyone knows she’s permanently banned from this building and all associated properties."

"Yes, Miss Valance," Hunter responded with professional efficiency, approaching Nancy with the kind of measured movement that suggested he was perfectly prepared to use force if necessary.

"Don’t you dare touch me! I can walk myself out, keep your hands off me!" she hissed, yanking away from his reach. She stormed toward the exit, her heels clicking against the marble with such fury I thought she might actually break an ankle. Her attempts to maintain dignity while navigating in those clearly uncomfortable stilettos were almost pathetic to watch.

I observed her unsteady departure with undisguised amusement. The woman could barely walk straight in those weapons she called shoes, it was actually painful to witness such desperation.

"Dominic, I must say your taste in enemies has certainly improved, because that one, not even the devil himself could fix!" I muttered to myself. One of our senior clients who had overheard the entire exchange, gave me a knowing smile of female solidarity as she passed by.

Chapter 352: Phoebe Goes Missing

Gemma’s POV

The week had passed in a haze of family business and preparations, and I completely forgot to mention Nancy’s unexpected visit to Dominic’s office. That same day, we had ventured into the secured shopping district to find Vincenzo’s birthday gift. His birthday celebration was scheduled for the weekend at the Thorne family estate, and the young heir had been calling me constantly all week, buzzing with excitement about the party details. His enthusiasm was absolutely endearing.

The celebration day arrived quickly. I felt particularly at peace since changing my phone number had finally ended those disturbing calls, allowing me to sleep without fear again.

"Songbird, are you ready to go?" Dominic strolled into our walk-in closet, selecting one of his custom Italian watches and fastening it around his wrist with practiced ease.

"Almost there, handsome," I replied, applying the final touches to my makeup.

Dominic checked his encrypted phone, smiling. "Vincenzo won’t stop calling. What an impatient kid!"

"He’s just thrilled about his big day," I laughed, amused by Vincenzo’s single-minded focus these past few days on his coming-of-age celebration.

"That boy gets excited about any family gathering," Dominic chuckled. "I’ll wait for you downstairs."

After he left, I finished my makeup, slipped into my dress, and examined my reflection. The emerald green gown I’d chosen deliberately matched Dominic’s eyes. It hugged my curves perfectly, featuring a tasteful V-neckline and elegant shoulder straps. My hair was styled in a sophisticated braid with a few loose tendrils framing my face.

When I descended the marble staircase, Dominic’s reaction was immediate and gratifying.

"My goddess!" he exclaimed, his eyes traveling appreciatively over my form. "You’re the most magnificent creature my eyes have ever beheld!"

I smiled at his enthusiasm. "You always know exactly what to say, don’t you?"

"I’m merely stating facts," Dominic replied, wrapping his arms around my waist. "It’s almost unfair to the other family members—you’ll be stealing everyone’s attention!"

"And that doesn’t make you jealous?" I teased.

"Not at all," he responded confidently. "I know you’re mine. Let them admire your beauty—you’re absolutely breathtaking. I’m just fortunate to be the man who gets to take you home."

"Well," I murmured, giving him a quick kiss, "keep talking like that, Dominic Frost, and you might receive more than just admiring glances by night’s end."

His smile widened considerably. "In that case, I can’t wait for this celebration to be over!"

I laughed at his eagerness. "Seems like impatience runs in the Frost bloodline!"

He joined my laughter as we headed out, his arm possessively around my waist.

Nadia had arranged her son’s celebration in the Thorne estate’s grand ballroom—though "estate" hardly did justice to what was essentially a fortified compound. The residence resembled those featured in luxury magazines, with every detail exquisitely refined, blending old-world elegance with modern security features.

The ballroom stood adjacent to the main residence, overlooking meticulously maintained gardens patrolled by discrete security personnel. Imposing marble columns supported a vaulted ceiling, while the walls featured bulletproof glass panels. Massive crystal chandeliers hung from above, their light reflecting brilliantly throughout the opulent space.

Despite the grandeur, the decorations maintained tasteful sophistication befitting a family heir. The entertainment was spectacular—acrobats executing impressive maneuvers on aerial silks suspended from the ceiling. Professional performers moved throughout the space, while fire-breathers created

dramatic displays at the secured entrances. It was as if the circus performers themselves served as living decorations—luxurious yet still appropriate for a young heir's milestone celebration.

"Auntie! You look absolutely ravishing tonight, even more stunning than usual," Vincenzo greeted me enthusiastically, offering an elaborately garnished mocktail from a silver tray. "This is for you, beautiful. No alcohol, of course—for my little cousin's sake."

"Thank you, sweetie! How thoughtful," I smiled, embracing him warmly and offering birthday wishes before he turned to embrace Dominic with obvious affection.

"Auntie, I adore the gift you sent! Look—I'm already wearing it!" Vincenzo proudly displayed the platinum wristwatch I'd selected from Dominic's connections.

"I'm delighted you like it, sweetie."

"And what about my present?" Dominic interjected with mock offense. "No mention of that?"

"Uncle, it's incredible!" Vincenzo showed off the gold bracelet Dominic had given him. "And I especially appreciated the generous contribution that appeared in my account." He laughed heartily.

"Use it wisely, kid," Dominic advised, embracing his nephew again with genuine warmth.

"Your friends are at that table, near the family's reserved section," Vincenzo indicated, pointing toward tables close to the main stage area.

"I'm here, cutie!" Zoe announced her arrival, dragging Finn behind her through the security checkpoint.

"Oh my goodness!" Vincenzo dramatically placed his hand over his heart, applauding theatrically. "I feel compelled to acknowledge this masterpiece!"

"Careful, Vincenzo—do you have a death wish?" Finn joked, attempting to appear stern despite his amusement.

"If I’m to die admiring this beauty, I’ll embrace my fate willingly," Vincenzo winked at Zoe, causing everyone to burst into laughter.

"You troublemaker!" Finn couldn’t maintain his serious expression, knowing Vincenzo’s harmless flirtation with Zoe was a running joke between them all.

"Cutie, you know the rules—call me when you turn eighteen," Zoe hugged him before immediately turning her attention to my midsection. "Where’s auntie’s little baby? Is your mommy taking proper care of you? Tell auntie everything."

"Zo, you realize I’m only in early pregnancy, right?" I laughed at her enthusiasm.

"So? He’s already becoming familiar with my voice. When he arrives, I’ll be his favorite aunt!" Zoe declared confidently.

We reached our designated table and greeted everyone. Zander sat uncomfortably between Gerard’s sisters, who were clearly pursuing him aggressively. Erica and Audrey, attractive women in their forties with substantial divorce settlements, appeared utterly fascinated by him. As Gerard often remarked, they lived rather carefree lives since their divorces, frequenting family events and changing romantic partners with remarkable frequency.

"Gemma!" Zander excused himself immediately upon seeing us approach. "Thank God you’ve arrived."

"Weren’t you enjoying Gerard’s sisters’ company? They’re quite charming," Dominic teased knowingly.

"Too charming," Zander wiped his forehead nervously. "They actually grabbed my backside, claiming they wanted to check if I worked out. Then they attempted to grab my—well, you understand."

"Only attempted?" Dominic laughed mercilessly at Zander’s predicament. "Watch out—they won’t give up easily. Since their divorces, they’ve become quite bold in their pursuits."

"I need to find Phoebe quickly!" Zander glanced around anxiously. "She went to the powder room but hasn’t returned."

"She probably stopped to chat with someone," I suggested reassuringly.

"Perhaps, but she promised not to be long. Those predatory sisters were already circling, and Phoebe promised to protect me from their advances." Zander appeared genuinely concerned.

"Since when does a grown man need protection from determined women?" Dominic laughed without mercy.

"Have they pursued you?" Zander countered defensively.

"Fortunately not. Being Nadia’s brother has its advantages—Gerard forbade them from approaching me, and since they respect Nadia, they’ve honored that boundary." Dominic smiled smugly.

"Lucky you. I feel like prime target on display!" Zander’s expression prompted another round of laughter from Dominic.

"Seriously, where’s Phoebe?" Zander asked again, his concern becoming more apparent.

"Come on, Zander, give her some privacy," I scolded, though I found his discomfort amusing.

"Gemma, it’s been quite a while since she left for the restroom." His serious tone caught my attention immediately.

"Alright, I’ll help you find her," I offered, accompanying him toward the powder rooms.

Phoebe wasn’t in the ladies’ room. Our calls went directly to voicemail. We searched throughout the celebration but found no trace of her anywhere. We encountered Vincenzo and Brenda, but they hadn’t seen Phoebe either. Something definitely felt wrong in the secured compound.

Chapter 353: Phoebe Under Attack

Gemma’s POV

"Something doesn’t feel right, Zander," I said, scanning the crowded family gathering for any flash of lime green. Phoebe had disappeared without explanation, and every instinct I’d developed since joining this world was screaming danger. "Why would Phoebe suddenly leave the celebration? It doesn’t make sense."

"I’m as concerned as you are, Gemma," Zander replied, his trained eyes continuously sweeping the crowd of made men and their associates. "But let’s not draw attention. Finding a woman in a bright lime green dress at a Thorne family event shouldn’t be this challenging."

"Maybe she stepped onto the terrace for air," I suggested, though doubt crept into my voice. I shared Zander’s unease but wanted to maintain hope. "Let’s check the outer grounds."

"I pray that’s all it is," Zander muttered, his expression revealing deeper concerns than he was admitting.

I studied his weathered face, noting the tension lines that spoke of too many battles fought. "What’s really eating at you, Zander?"

He rubbed his scarred neck anxiously. "I don’t know... you think she’s deliberately avoiding me?"

"Why would she be running from you?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"Why wouldn’t she?" His vulnerability caught me off guard. "Maybe I have some effect on women that sends them fleeing. My ex-fiancée disappeared shortly before we were supposed to be married."

I planted my hands firmly on my hips. "Zander, should I call Erica and Audrey over here to show you just how non-threatening women find you? Quite the opposite, actually."

A reluctant smile ghosted across his lips. "Please don’t. It took considerable maneuvering to escape their clutches. Those two were practically pawing at me like I was prime beef!"

"I seriously doubt Phoebe is running from you," I laughed, amused by his discomfort with feminine attention. "Let's find her. She might be feeling unwell."

I signaled to Hunter, one of Dominic's most trusted soldiers who was maintaining surveillance from a respectful distance. I showed him Phoebe's photo on my phone and requested he coordinate with the other family security to locate her. He nodded curtly and moved to speak with his crew. Soon, one enforcer approached Hunter with urgent whispers before rushing away.

"Gemma..." Hunter returned to us with a grim expression that made my blood run cold.

"What is it? Did you find her?" I asked, already sensing the worst.

"She's been assaulted. Follow me." He gestured toward a garden path, and Zander immediately reacted, practically dragging me along as he charged in the indicated direction.

"Assaulted? What happened to her?" Zander demanded, his voice tight with the kind of rage I'd learned to recognize in this world as we hurried behind Hunter.

"Thanks to your alert, we interrupted before anything worse occurred," Hunter explained as we moved swiftly. "But the young lady is severely traumatized."

He guided us along a stone pathway behind the family compound to a secluded garden area surrounded by high ornamental hedges. There sat Phoebe on a wrought iron bench, sobbing uncontrollably, her makeup streaked down her cheeks, desperately holding the torn fabric of her dress against her chest. Two family soldiers flanked her, one attempting comfort while the other maintained watch for additional threats. Zander rushed to her side.

"Christ, Phoebe," he pulled her into his protective embrace. "What happened, sweetheart?"

"Zander," was all she managed through her tears as she clung to him like a lifeline.

I turned to the soldiers. "What exactly went down? Have you identified who did this?"

"Yes, ma’am," one enforcer replied grimly. "When we arrived, we found Marcus forcing himself on her, trying to kiss her while she fought back. He ripped her dress during the attack. Fortunately, we reached them before the situation could escalate further, thanks to your instruction to search for her."

"That bastard is a cancer," I said, watching Zander cradle Phoebe protectively. "Did you grab him? How did he even get onto family grounds?"

"It’s a large gathering, ma’am," the soldier answered, sweat forming on his brow under my scrutiny. "Security may have been compromised. He possibly entered with catering staff or slipped through during shift change. We’re reviewing surveillance footage and sweeping the entire property, but he vanished when we approached."

I immediately contacted Dominic, requesting he bring Gerard without causing alarm among the guests. They arrived soon after.

"Gemma, what’s the situation?" Dominic asked, his face darkening with the promise of violence.

"Marcus attacked Phoebe," I explained. "Our people stopped the worst of it, but she’s badly shaken."

"That piece of garbage needs to be eliminated," Gerard snarled, loosening his tie and barking orders to nearby soldiers. After dispatching teams, he knelt beside Phoebe and assessed her condition. "Let’s move to the main house. She needs privacy and medical attention. Gemma, will you stay with her?"

"Absolutely, Gerard. I won’t leave her alone," I promised. Phoebe remained too shaken to walk, so Zander carefully lifted her into his arms. We took a discreet route to avoid the curious eyes of family members and associates.

Once inside the compound’s main residence, Gerard directed us to a secure guest room. Zander gently placed Phoebe on the bed, and I requested medical supplies and fresh clothing. Gerard left to coordinate these arrangements, sending staff to bring brandy and water as well. As I watched Phoebe’s trembling form, fury built inside me like molten steel. How many more innocents would suffer before Marcus was finally put down permanently?

Chapter 354: Rising Above Fear

Gemma’s POV

Phoebe’s trembling gradually subsided as Zander held her close, his protective embrace never wavering since the moment our security team found her. The raw concern etched across his face revealed just how deeply this attack had shaken him, and I could see the barely contained rage simmering beneath his professional calm.

"Are you feeling stronger now? Can you tell us exactly what happened?" Zander asked softly, his voice carrying the gentle authority of someone accustomed to dealing with trauma victims in our world.

Phoebe took a shaky breath, her voice still fragile. "I was returning from the ladies’ room when Vincenzo’s grandfather cornered me in the corridor. Vincenzo had warned both me and my sister multiple times to avoid him, said he was a dangerous man with old grudges against the family." Her words trembled with remembered fear. "He grabbed me violently, covered my mouth with his hand, and dragged me toward the service exit. No matter how hard I fought, I couldn’t break free from his grip."

"That vicious bastard," I snarled, fury burning through my veins. In our world, attacking someone under family protection was a declaration of war. "He’s made his last mistake."

Zander reached for a crystal tumbler filled with amber liquid from the side table. "Here, sweetheart, drink this. The whiskey will help settle your nerves." As he offered it to Phoebe, I noticed her hands were still shaking violently, one desperately clutching her torn evening gown to preserve her modesty. I quickly moved to her side, helping hold the delicate fabric in place so she could accept the glass.

"Thank you both so much," Phoebe whispered, fresh tears threatening to spill. "The security captain told me you were searching everywhere for me. If you hadn’t organized that search, if the guards hadn’t found me when they did..." She couldn’t complete the thought, her composure cracking again. "I don’t know what would have happened."

"I should have assigned a bodyguard to escort you," Zander said with self-recrimination, pressing a tender kiss to her hair. Even as the family’s trusted physician, he understood the constant dangers that surrounded our circle.

"Zander, there was no way you could have anticipated this," Phoebe reassured him, resting her hand on his knee. He managed a strained smile, continuing to hold her protectively while gently stroking her dark hair.

"You're under our protection now, and I swear I'm not letting you out of my sight again tonight," Zander declared with fierce determination, causing a faint blush to color Phoebe's pale cheeks despite her trauma.

She looked up suddenly, worry flashing across her features. "You didn't inform Vincenzo about this incident, did you? I can't bear the thought of ruining his celebration."

"No, darling," I assured her quickly. "Only Zander and I are aware of what happened, along with Dominic, Gerard, and our security detail. But your safety and well-being are our immediate priority. Everything else can wait."

Zander tilted her chin up with practiced gentleness, his medical instincts combining with something deeper and more personal. "Now tell me honestly, beautiful, how are you really feeling? Did that animal hurt you anywhere else? Would you let me examine you properly?" The tenderness in his eyes went far beyond professional concern, revealing feelings that had clearly grown stronger than friendship.

"Well, look at that," I said with forced lightness, trying to ease some of the heavy tension in the room. "Phoebe's got herself a personal physician now." They both managed weak smiles, though their eyes remained locked on each other with unmistakable intimacy.

I knew their relationship was still in its delicate early stages. Phoebe had confided that they'd been talking regularly and had shared only a couple of carefully chaperoned outings, still "getting to know each other" as she'd put it. But I recognized the look in Zander's eyes tonight—this was becoming something profound and serious for him.

"I'm alright, Zander, truly. He didn't manage to... the security team arrived before he could really hurt me," Phoebe said softly, though the revulsion in her voice was unmistakable. "But I desperately need a shower. I need to wash away every trace of his touch."

"That’s an excellent idea," I encouraged warmly. "I’ll help you get ready, and we can fix your hair and makeup afterward. You’ll look absolutely stunning again." A sharp knock at the door interrupted our conversation, and I called for whoever it was to enter.

Gerard stepped into the room, his expression a dangerous mixture of concern and barely leashed violence. As Dominic’s lieutenant, he understood the full implications of tonight’s attack. "Excuse the interruption. Phoebe, are you feeling any better? Besides beating that worthless piece of garbage to within an inch of his life, is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Thank you, Gerard. I’m managing," Phoebe replied with remarkable composure given the circumstances. "I don’t want Vincenzo’s special night to be destroyed because of me. Gemma will help me freshen up, and then I’d like to rejoin the celebration."

"My dear girl, the party is absolutely the least of our concerns right now. Your safety comes first, always," Gerard insisted, his tone carrying the weight of family authority. "Our security team has reviewed all the surveillance footage. That coward is no longer on the property—he fled like the gutless rat he is the moment the alarms started."

"How did that bastard even manage to get past our perimeter?" I demanded, genuinely baffled by such a serious security breach.

Gerard’s jaw tightened with professional anger. "He infiltrated the catering crew, complete with their uniform and identification badge. Had professionally forged papers too—even our best guards didn’t recognize him as a threat."

Phoebe straightened her shoulders with admirable determination. "I still want to return to the party. Vincenzo was so excited about his birthday, and I refuse to let that monster steal his joy. But may I please shower first?"

"Of course, dear. Consider this your home," Gerard replied with genuine warmth. "And Phoebe, we need you to file an official report. There’s a detective friend of the family here tonight. Would you be willing to speak with him once you’ve had time to collect yourself?"

"Yes, absolutely," she nodded without hesitation.

"It’s Daniel, Phoebe—you remember him," I reminded her gently, and recognition brought a small smile to her face.

Some time later, Phoebe had transformed herself back into the picture of elegance and poise. She’d showered thoroughly, her evening gown had been expertly cleaned and mended by Gerard’s efficient household staff, and her hair and makeup were once again flawless. No casual observer would suspect the trauma she’d endured earlier. As we returned to the celebration, I noticed Zander staying vigilantly at her side like a devoted sentinel.

"There you all are!" Vincenzo exclaimed when he spotted our group. "I’ve been looking everywhere! It’s time for everyone to sing happy birthday to me!"

"Vincenzo, you really do love being the center of attention, don’t you?" I laughed, draping my arm around his shoulders with genuine affection.

"Aunt Gemma, I’m a proper young man now—officially the same age as Brenda!" His excitement was absolutely infectious, and I glanced at Phoebe with deep admiration for her strength and generosity in refusing to let Shelton’s despicable actions cast even the smallest shadow over Vincenzo’s milestone moment.

Chapter 355: Threats Converge

Dominic’s POV

The situation with Marcus had spiraled into complete chaos. His attempted assault on Phoebe during my nephew’s birthday celebration at the family compound was beyond comprehension. Gerard, as head of family security, was justifiably furious, as was my nephew. My sister was devastated that such a horrific violation had occurred within the sacred walls of our territory. The very next day, she ordered our landscaping crew to completely demolish the hidden garden where the assault occurred, determined to rebuild it as an open courtyard where nothing could be concealed from our surveillance network.

We visited Phoebe’s family the day after the incident, desperate to make amends for Marcus’s deplorable behavior on Thorne territory. Thankfully, they were remarkably understanding and gracious, despite the trauma inflicted upon their daughter. They expressed genuine gratitude toward Gemma and Zander for finding and protecting Phoebe, preventing what could have been an even more devastating outcome for both families.

Phoebe courageously provided a comprehensive statement to our family lawyers, and Gerard supplied the compound's security footage as evidence for the formal complaint. It helped tremendously that Phoebe's father was the brother of a judge and had significant influence over the magistrate overseeing Marcus's case. With this advantage and the mounting evidence against him—including his brazen attack on Gemma outside her boutique—Detective Daniel successfully requested Marcus's arrest warrant, which the judge promptly signed. The only problem now was that Marcus had seemingly vanished into the city's underground, likely seeking refuge with rival families.

I arranged to meet Daniel at our usual location in the precinct's back office for updates on the manhunt. The situation had left me deeply concerned about family security, and I could see that Gemma was worried about potential retaliation. She had even suggested postponing our wedding ceremony, a proposal I absolutely refused to consider.

"What's the latest intelligence, Daniel?" I asked, settling into the chair across from our family's inside man at the police department.

"I wish I had better news for the family, Dominic. Your father has gone completely underground," Daniel replied, clearly as frustrated as I was about Marcus's continued freedom to threaten our operations.

"Where could that treacherous bastard have found sanctuary?" It was more of a rhetorical question, but Daniel, being the thorough investigator the family paid him to be, had conducted a more extensive search than I had anticipated.

"Dominic, he needs to hide, and since you've frozen his access to family accounts, his resources are completely depleted. I doubt he's left our territory—he lacks the funds and connections. We've checked all the safe houses and neutral hotels, and he's not registered anywhere under any of his known aliases. Someone with serious protection must be harboring him, but we've had surveillance on all the associates you identified, and there's been no contact with any of them."

"I honestly have no idea which family would be foolish enough to harbor Marcus at this point," I admitted, running my fingers through my hair in frustration. "He's burned bridges with everyone who ever showed him loyalty."

"He’s avoiding all his usual territories and meeting spots too. But his situation is deteriorating rapidly, Dominic. The district attorney was informed today that there’s an extradition request for Marcus from our associates in Chicago."

"Extradition?" I questioned, finding this development intriguing rather than concerning.

"He’s facing charges of aggravated assault and drugging there. Same criminal pattern—he drugged a woman and attempted to assault her during a business negotiation between families."

"Yet another victim of his predatory behavior," I sighed heavily. "How can that monster possibly share my blood? I’ve asked myself this question countless times throughout this nightmare."

"Stop thinking of him as family," Daniel advised firmly. "Like you’ve said before, he merely contributed genetic material. You’re nothing like him in character or conduct. Thankfully, you inherited everything worthwhile from your mother, including her strength and moral compass."

"She is an extraordinary woman," I agreed. "She never deserved to be trapped in a marriage with someone like Marcus."

"That’s ancient history now. From what I understand, she’s found happiness with Prince Andrew Taylor," Daniel smiled knowingly.

"Yes, Andrew is legitimate European nobility, according to our background checks through Zoe’s intelligence network." I smiled, thinking about how genuinely happy my mother had appeared lately during family gatherings.

"Speaking of your mother," Daniel’s expression shifted to something more serious, "I had an extensive conversation with her during your nephew’s birthday celebration."

"That sounds ominous. What family secrets are you about to reveal now?" I asked, sensing another uncomfortable revelation approaching.

"Your mother gave me explicit permission to share something she never disclosed to you before, something she felt you needed to understand given current circumstances."

"Just tell me directly, Daniel. It's better to hear the complete truth at once rather than draw out the suspense," I urged impatiently.

"Your mother mentioned that your grandfather—Marcus's father—immediately after she became pregnant with Nadia, seemed unusually concerned about her safety and the baby's welfare within the family structure. He said something she didn't fully comprehend at the time, but after recent conversations with Prince Andrew, who has experience with similar cases in European criminal organizations, it started making more sense."

"Your grandfather warned your mother to exercise extreme caution around Marcus because he never formed genuine emotional attachments to anyone. He exhibited violent tendencies and showed absolutely no remorse or empathy when he inflicted harm on others, whether family members or business associates."

"So he's always been a sociopathic predator. I already suspected that much."

"Your grandfather explained that obtaining an official psychiatric evaluation was impossible because Marcus refused all professional assessment, but a psychiatrist friend of your grandfather's warned that Marcus likely suffered from a severe personality disorder."

"What specific type of disorder are we discussing?"

"Marcus exhibits classic characteristics of either psychopathy or sociopathy—most likely the former, given his calculated manipulation and complete lack of conscience."

"And that's the man my mother's father forced her to marry for political alliance," I said bitterly.

"Exactly. If this assessment is accurate, the current situation is far more dangerous than we initially realized. Marcus won't stop his predatory behavior."

"Then he needs to be permanently stopped," I replied, understanding the full gravity of Daniel's implications. My concern for Gemma intensified, though I felt somewhat reassured by her cautious behavior and the armed security detail watching over her.

"Dominic! Good to see you!" Inspector Adler entered with a professional smile.

"Adler, how are things progressing?" I stood to greet our other valuable contact within the police hierarchy.

"I'm managing well, but unfortunately, I have news that will complicate your family's security situation."

"Another problem?" I was beginning to regret this meeting at the precinct.

"I'm sorry, but a judge granted bail to Nick. I just received the official notification."

"The situation keeps deteriorating," I lamented, thinking about the additional threat this posed to Gemma.

"Don't worry, we're maintaining constant surveillance," Daniel attempted to provide reassurance.

"That's correct. I've already assigned experienced plainclothes detectives to maintain around-the-clock monitoring of his activities," Adler added, which did ease my concerns slightly.

"That provides some comfort," I exhaled deeply.

"As for you, Daniel, that internal affairs investigation remains highly problematic," Adler handed a confidential folder to Daniel.

"Damn it, Adler! This corruption inquiry will destroy everything I've built!" Daniel became visibly agitated.

"I’m still pushing back against the investigation, but someone with significant influence is applying pressure from the other direction," Adler warned.

"Is this still related to the same matter we discussed previously?" I asked, and Adler nodded grimly. "This could expose our entire network, Daniel."

"Very reassuring perspective, friend," Daniel replied with bitter sarcasm, understanding that his precarious position as our inside man was becoming increasingly dangerous for all involved parties.

Chapter 356: Poisoned Gift

Gemma’s POV

After the chaos surrounding Vincenzo’s birthday celebration at the Thorne family compound, Nadia insisted we retreat to her coastal safehouse the following weekend. She was practically vibrating with excitement about finalizing our wedding plans, her enthusiasm proving contagious despite my lingering exhaustion.

That weekend, our entire crew made the journey - family associates, household staff, and even our security detail’s K-9 units. I extended invitations to Phoebe and Brenda, believing a change of scenery might ease their nerves after Phoebe’s harrowing encounter with rival family enforcers. Their parents seemed visibly relieved seeing them in better spirits, especially after Phoebe’s mother confided that her daughter had been suffering night terrors and panic attacks.

Dominic, surprisingly, couldn’t contain his excitement about the beachfront wedding venue. He kept praising the strategic advantages of Nadia’s property, but nothing prepared me for witnessing it firsthand. Nadia’s taste for fortified luxury was evident in what could only be described as a coastal fortress disguised as an elegant mansion.

The imposing structure rose two stories in a defensive L-configuration, featuring reinforced glass walls that Nadia favored for their ability to provide clear sightlines while flooding the interior with natural light. The property boasted a spectacular infinity pool overlooking the endless Atlantic and an expansive lawn where Nadia was already envisioning our celebration under armed protection. The entire compound was breathtaking yet strategically impenetrable.

"Well, Gemma," Nadia turned toward me with an expectant smile spreading across her weathered face. "What do you think? Would you honor me by celebrating your union here?"

"Nadia, the honor belongs entirely to me," I replied, still absorbing the natural beauty surrounding this carefully constructed sanctuary. "Your fortress looks like it belongs in an architectural magazine."

"I'm thrilled you appreciate it. This place carries deep significance for me," Nadia gazed at the compound with evident affection. "Years ago, after losing a pregnancy during a particularly brutal territory war, I fell into devastating depression. Gerard believed ocean air might restore my sanity, so he secured a small safehouse nearby where we spent weeks in hiding. This was merely empty coastline then. Daily, I'd patrol the shoreline and position myself on that rocky outcrop, watching the waves crash while contemplating our losses. Gradually, my spirit began healing, as if each breaking wave carried away pieces of my grief. Gerard recognized the transformation and moved heaven and earth to acquire this strategic property. He gifted it to me, encouraging me to design whatever fortress I desired. Being an architect before joining the family, though I don't practice civilian work anymore, I designed every defensive aspect of this compound myself, ensuring we never lose sight of the natural landscape we're protecting."

By the conclusion of Nadia's story, tears welled in my eyes, and I embraced her spontaneously, pouring genuine affection into the gesture.

"Thank you for sharing such a powerful story," I whispered during our embrace. "Your compound is perfect for our wedding - it's a sanctuary built on survival and new beginnings."

When I stepped back, Nadia's eyes glistened with emotion. We returned to the main house to find cheerful chaos filling the living space. Zoe, true to her controlling nature, had already organized the day's security rotations. A barbecue was planned, with everyone already changed into casual clothes. The women were eager for ocean swimming under watchful guard, so we decided the men would handle meal preparation while we enjoyed the waves.

By late afternoon, our group was sprawled around the pool area, pleasantly exhausted from the day's supervised activities. One of Nadia's household operatives approached me carrying a small package adorned with an elegant ribbon.

"Miss, this just arrived through our screening process," he said, extending the suspicious delivery.

"Who brought it through our perimeter?" I inquired with growing concern, glancing at Dominic beside me, who immediately tensed with professional alertness.

"A civilian courier service, miss. Definitely not one of our usual contacts," the operative replied with practiced caution.

I accepted the package and noticed the seal of a renowned artisanal chocolate manufacturer. Being an absolute chocolate enthusiast, especially since my pregnancy had intensified these cravings beyond reason, I began salivating immediately despite my wariness.

"Who sent this, Songbird?" Dominic asked with sharp interest, his protective instincts already activated.

"Wasn't it you?" When he shook his head grimly, I added, "There's no identification card attached, so I have no idea."

I carefully opened the package, anticipating the sweet indulgence while remaining alert for threats. Recognizing the contents, my excitement dimmed considerably - these were liqueur-filled chocolates containing significant alcohol content.

"Oh, these contain alcohol. I should avoid them because of the baby," I pouted with genuine disappointment.

"Goddess, don't make that face. I'll acquire safe chocolates for you immediately. Let me dispose of these," Dominic said, gently but firmly removing the suspicious package from my hands.

"What's happening, Dominic? Confiscating treats from a pregnant woman?" Zoe approached, giving him a mock-stern expression while maintaining professional awareness.

"Gemma received these chocolates anonymously, but they contain alcohol and aren't safe during pregnancy," Dominic explained with underlying tension.

"I'll handle disposal," Zoe grinned, claiming the package for investigation.

Gerard, overhearing our conversation as he approached with visible concern, interjected, "I appreciate fine liqueur chocolates, Zoe! Save some for testing. Gemma, I'll have someone acquire pregnancy-safe alternatives for you and my nephew immediately, don't worry." He gestured for Dominic to maintain vigilance.

The small package contained six chocolates that were quickly distributed among trusted associates - one each to Zoe, Quentin, Nadia, Xavier, my mother, and Bee for controlled consumption.

True to his word, before long I sat contentedly with an enormous selection of pregnancy-safe chocolates Gerard had expedited through secure channels. However, I noticed he appeared unusually pale and tense.

"Quentin, are you feeling alright?" I asked with mounting concern.

"Actually, no. My stomach feels like it's being shredded by knives," Quentin grimaced, clutching his abdomen with obvious agony.

"Thank God we have medical professionals here," I said urgently. "Let's get Andrew or Zander to examine you immediately."

I helped stabilize him toward the couch. At that precise moment, Zoe descended the stairs complaining of identical stomach pains with alarming intensity. Finding this coincidence deeply disturbing, I briefly left them to summon Andrew and Zander from the secured pool area. They responded with immediate professional urgency.

"What have our two operatives consumed?" Zander attempted maintaining calm while assessing the crisis.

"Guys, I'm going to be violently sick," Zoe announced with desperate urgency.

"Hold position." I sprinted to the kitchen, returning with a disposal container just in time for Zoe to empty her stomach violently.

"Let me use that, Zoe," Quentin requested desperately before vomiting with equal intensity.

"This is extremely concerning," Andrew observed grimly, examining both patients with clinical precision. He checked their pupils and monitored their pulse rates with growing alarm. "Who else consumed those chocolates you received, Gemma?"

Chapter 357: Poisoned Family Gift

Gemma's POV

I rattled off the names of everyone affected to Andrew, and alarm immediately filled his steel-gray eyes. The Thorne family's consigliere instructed me to gather everyone in the main hall of the compound. I dashed through the corridors, finding my mother in her guest quarters, clearly ill from the poisoned chocolates. I asked Ryder, one of Dominic's trusted soldiers, to help her to the hall. Next, I located Nadia and Bee together in the east wing, both looking frighteningly weak. I called for Zander and the other enforcers to assist with them. In the marble bathroom, I discovered Xavier retching violently.

"We need to get to the family clinic immediately. They've been poisoned," Andrew announced, his voice carrying the cold authority of someone who'd seen too much violence. "Let's get them into two armored vehicles. I'll ride in one and Zander in the other to monitor their conditions. Ryder, you drive the lead car, Caleb the second. Gemma, you stay here with the younger family members. In your condition, the chaos of even our private medical facility isn't good for you. Vincenzo, watch over her, get her some calming tea, and call me if she remains anxious."

Andrew took charge with the natural command of a mafia strategist, organizing everything with military precision. Within minutes, they departed for the Thorne family's private medical compound, promising updates. I couldn't contain my tears. Remaining at the safe house were Vincenzo, Carmen, Phoebe, Brenda, Gerard, Lila, and myself. Carmen wept as heavily as I did, her shoulders shaking with each sob.

Daniel acted swiftly, retrieving the chocolate box from the incinerator room and carefully packaging it for forensic analysis. He called Adler, one of the family's street contacts, explaining what had happened and asking him to check if anyone suspicious had purchased chocolates from that particular high-end brand. He summoned the household security staff for questioning and went to examine the surveillance footage to identify whoever had delivered the package to our heavily guarded compound.

Carmen and I clung to each other in the leather-appointed sitting room, desperately awaiting news that seemed to take forever. Dominic called multiple times from the clinic to check on me and relay that

everyone was receiving treatment from the family's private physicians, though there were no definitive updates. It wasn't until late that night that we finally started getting concrete information.

"Gemma, how are you holding up?" Dominic's voice came through the encrypted phone line.

"Anxious, Dominic. Please, tell me something," I begged.

"The family doctor just spoke with Andrew. It was definitely poisoning from the chocolates, as our consigliere suspected. They've performed gastric lavage on everyone and are administering antidotes. They'll remain at the medical facility until they're stable."

"Will they recover? All of them?" Terror gripped my heart. These people were my chosen family – I couldn't bear losing any of them to whoever was targeting me.

"From what we understand, yes. Andrew explained we need to wait and see. But since they received prompt medical attention from our people, the prognosis is as good as possible." Dominic's words provided some comfort. "However, our mothers and Nadia are in worse condition. The poison seems to have affected them more severely."

"What does that mean exactly?"

"Their recovery might take longer. We just have to wait. Please, Gemma, take care of yourself. Eat properly and get some rest. Think of our baby. And under no circumstances eat anything if you don't know who sent it through our security screening."

"I promise, Dominic. I'll never eat, or let anyone around me eat, anything without knowing its source," I vowed, still feeling dazed by the brazen attack on our compound. "What kind of poison was it?"

"Industrial rat poison mixed with arsenic." Dominic's sigh sent chills down my spine – someone had tried to make this as lethal as possible.

"Let me speak with Daniel. I need to pass along some information from our street contacts."

"Okay. Take care, my love."

"You too, my Songbird."

I handed the encrypted phone to Daniel and relayed Dominic's update to the others. Carmen, terrified by this escalation in the threats against our family, clung to me desperately. I held her just as tightly, recognizing her vulnerability in this deadly game.

"Everyone," Phoebe approached, "I know nobody feels like eating, but we need to maintain our strength to protect our family. Let's have something light." She had worked with the kitchen staff to prepare a table of simple snacks, all from sealed packages that had been thoroughly tested.

We ate in somber silence in the fortified dining room. Later, we decided to sleep in the main hall, wanting to stay together through this nightmare under the watchful eyes of the night security detail. Daniel remained on multiple phone lines, agitated and determined to discover which enemy family or rogue element had tried to kill me – for the chocolates had clearly been intended for me.

The next morning, I awoke to Dominic's gentle kiss on my forehead. I'd fallen asleep holding Carmen, who still slumbered peacefully in my arms on the Italian leather sectional. Dominic whispered reassuringly that everything would be okay, his hand instinctively checking the concealed weapon at his waist.

The day stretched endlessly, but by evening, Gerard, Zoe, and several others had returned to the compound. Though exhausted and laden with medical instructions from the family physicians, they were alive and out of immediate danger.

The others had organized shifts at the medical facility – while some rested in the compound's secure quarters, others maintained their vigil. Zander and Andrew refused to leave the clinic, as did Ryder, according to Dominic.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, sitting beside Gerard on the reinforced porch that overlooked our security perimeter.

"I’m okay, still a bit disoriented, but I’ll be fine." Gerard smiled weakly, taking my hand with fingers that still trembled slightly.

"Gerard, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have—" I began, but he cut me off with the gentle authority of a family elder.

"Don’t apologize for something you didn’t do." Gerard looked directly into my eyes with the wisdom of someone who’d survived decades in this world. "I’m grateful you didn’t eat those chocolates. It could have been fatal for my nephew."

Though I’d considered this already, guilt still weighed heavily on me that they had suffered because someone wanted me dead.

"Don’t overthink this, Gemma," Gerard said, pulling me into a protective hug. "The mothers will recover, and we’ll find whoever did this."

"Please tell me you’re not blaming yourself, auntie?" Vincenzo joined our conversation, his young face already showing the hard edges that came from growing up in this life. "You silly woman. This wasn’t your fault. Stop that thinking – it’s not good for my little cousin."

His words drew a smile from me. This boy had inherited the Thorne family’s gift for leadership; he truly possessed the qualities that would make him formidable in this world.

Several days later, Nadia, Bee, and my mother were discharged from the family medical facility and brought back to the compound. Our allies from other families had returned to their territories to attend to their responsibilities. Daniel assured us he was close to identifying the culprit through the family’s extensive network of informants. Zoe told Dominic not to worry about the money laundering operations, and Caleb granted me more time away from my duties at the legitimate businesses. Brenda and Phoebe departed with Zander, needing to return to their cover identities at school and college, while Zander had obligations with the family’s shipping operations.

We spent the remainder of the week at the compound, and I convinced Dominic to postpone our blood oath ceremony by some time, giving us a month to properly secure everything and root out our enemies. Fortunately, everyone recovered well from the poisoning attempt. When we returned to normal operations the following Sunday, life had largely returned to the controlled chaos of mafia family

business, and the unfortunate incident seemed behind us – all that remained was discovering who was responsible for the brazen attack on the Thorne family compound and delivering the appropriate retribution.

Chapter 358: Unholy Alliance

Nick's POV

Finally, that incompetent excuse for a lawyer managed to secure my release from the state penitentiary. I walked out of those concrete walls earlier than anticipated, a stroke of luck thanks to that worthless public defender who somehow convinced the parole board I was reformed. Now I had all the energy and determination to settle my score with that Thorne family Capo and reclaim what was rightfully mine - my beautiful Gemma.

Nancy was waiting for me outside in her beat-up sedan, looking as desperate as always. The word on the street was that Stevie had instructed me to take some time off before sending further instructions about resuming my position in his crew. So Nancy drove me to her rundown apartment in the outer districts. I only made one stop at my mother's place to collect my belongings and the small arsenal I'd hidden there. I couldn't give less of a damn about that pathetic household of mine anymore.

When we arrived at Nancy's place, I was greeted with an unexpected surprise. She had a visitor, and not just any visitor - it was the father of that wealthy mafia prince who was screwing my Gemma. Marcus Frost sat in her cramped living room like he owned the place, his expensive suit looking out of place among the secondhand furniture. I quickly realized that dysfunctional families were universal in this business, especially seeing how this exiled former soldier openly despised his own blood. But I'd learn more about his motivations after taking a long shower and spending the night reminding Nancy who she belonged to, which is exactly what I did.

The next morning, I settled on the torn couch next to the old mobster, sizing him up. Marcus Frost had the weathered look of a man who'd seen too much blood and betrayal in his decades with the Thorne organization before his exile.

"So, old timer, what's your issue with your golden boy?" I asked bluntly, not bothering with the usual street pleasantries.

"He’s an ungrateful son who chose those Thorne bastards over his own father," he replied with remarkable simplicity, his voice carrying the gravelly tone of a lifetime smoker. "I have a proposition for you, since our objectives seem to converge toward a single target, or rather, person."

"Alright. Let’s hear it. What do you want?" One valuable lesson I’d learned from dealing with Stevie’s crew was never to waste time dancing around the point when business was involved.

"I want Gemma Valance, but don’t worry, I just want to enjoy myself with that tight little body of hers. And I want my dear son dead." Marcus spoke with such casual detachment, as if discussing something as mundane as the weather forecast. The old bastard had ice water in his veins.

"Damn, old man, you’re talking about whacking your own flesh and blood? That’s cold even for this business." I couldn’t help but laugh at his ruthlessness. Even the most hardened street thugs I knew had lines they wouldn’t cross when it came to family.

"He’s worth nothing to me alive. Dead, I inherit half of his considerable fortune from the Thorne family investments, and believe me, that Capo has accumulated serious wealth through his money laundering operations." Now this was getting interesting. I could definitely benefit from this arrangement, especially if it meant taking down Dominic Frost in the process.

"And what’s in it for me?" I needed to establish from the start that my services weren’t free. Street muscle like me didn’t work for promises and handshakes.

"A generous sum when I receive the inheritance from the family coffers."

This old fox wasn’t going to outsmart me that easily. I’d been played by too many people already.

"I want thirty percent of whatever you inherit from the Thorne organization. And don’t even think about crossing me, because if you do, you’re a dead man." I laid my cards on the table, letting him see the switchblade I kept in my jacket pocket.

"Thirty? You’re nothing but a street mercenary! Twenty," he countered, attempting to negotiate like we were discussing some legitimate business deal.

"Thirty. Non-negotiable. It’s better for you to have seventy percent with a dead son than nothing with him alive and climbing the family hierarchy." I stood my ground, knowing that desperation made men agreeable.

"Fine, thirty," he conceded after a moment’s reflection, probably calculating how much money was involved. "What do you have planned for little Gemma?"

"I just want to have my way with that gorgeous piece of ass and record it to send to your idiot son before he dies. That’ll drive him absolutely insane knowing another man claimed his woman." The thought of breaking that arrogant Capo’s spirit before ending his life filled me with satisfaction.

"That’s all you want?" Marcus asked, showing unexpected reasonableness for a man plotting his son’s murder.

"That’s all. Well, I mean, I want to enjoy her more than once. Girl like that deserves proper attention." The old man smiled knowingly, and I understood why; Gemma was undeniably the most beautiful woman in Port Serenity.

"Deal. But you’ll only get your turn after me. First, I want to relive some memories with that sweet young body." I established the hierarchy immediately so Marcus would know who was calling the shots in this partnership.

"Fine by me. But there’s one more thing." I knew it was too straightforward to be this simple.

"What now?" I snorted, irritated by yet another condition in what should have been a simple arrangement.

"That annoying Nancy wants to get with Dominic for his money and status in the organization. She could become problematic if she decides to warn him about our plans." Marcus warned me, confirming my suspicions that the bitch was scheming behind my back, probably hoping to trade up from street trash to mafia royalty.

"Don’t worry about that. We’ll take care of Nancy too once she’s served her purpose as our inside information source." I was already contemplating her elimination anyway, as she knew too much about my business dealings and had become a liability.

Marcus laughed with genuine satisfaction. I was beginning to like him - as evil as the devil himself and twice as cunning. We’d make an effective team against the Thorne family. Perhaps after we eliminated Dominic, I could find my own place in the organization’s power structure.

Nancy arrived at that moment, visibly displeased and carrying a bag of groceries. She had left early to gather intelligence about Gemma’s current location, since that smart girl had changed her phone number and moved apartments after the restraining order.

"So, dear Nancy, what news do you bring about our target?" I asked eagerly, noting how she avoided eye contact with both Marcus and me.

"That slut, your precious ex-girlfriend, went on some romantic weekend getaway with her Capo boyfriend and they haven’t returned to the city yet." Nancy was clearly in a foul mood, probably jealous that Gemma was living the high life while she remained stuck in this dump.

"When are they coming back to Port Serenity?" I pressed. This idiot couldn’t provide complete intelligence at once; I had to keep questioning her like she was some amateur.

"I don’t know exactly, they were supposed to be back by now, but someone in their group fell ill and they extended their trip to some private estate."

"Who got sick?" I insisted, needing every detail for our planning.

"I don’t know the specifics. I couldn’t discover anything else without raising suspicion." Nancy was fuming, and now I understood it was because watching Dominic Frost’s lavish lifestyle made her realize what she was missing.

"Getting nervous about your chances with the Capo, little Nancy?" I taunted, enjoying her obvious discomfort.

"Don’t push me, Nick!" She was genuinely irritated, probably realizing her dreams of mafia queen status were slipping away.

"You know what helps with stress?" I grabbed her hair forcefully, asserting dominance. "A good fuck! And look, we’ve got two experienced men here. What do you think, Marcus? Interested in a little celebration of our new partnership?"

"I’m always up for some recreational activity." The old gangster’s interest was quickly piqued, his eyes gleaming with predatory hunger.

"Then let’s begin. We’re going to thoroughly wreck this bitch today before we move on to bigger targets."

I threw Nancy onto the sagging couch and started tearing off her cheap dress. She protested initially, but eventually surrendered to the inevitable pleasure of our three-way encounter, her moans echoing through the thin apartment walls as we celebrated our unholy alliance.

Chapter 359: Guard Dog Unleashed

Dominic’s POV

Sunday evening brought us back from the family’s coastal safe house, the poisoning attempt finally behind us. Everyone had recovered completely, but I could feel the storm brewing on the horizon. My mood was already dark after Gemma postponed our wedding ceremony without discussing it with me first. While I understood her reasoning, the slight still burned.

We’d barely crossed the threshold when my secured line rang. Daniel’s voice carried news that would shatter Gemma’s fragile peace of mind: Nick had walked free from county lockup. My blood pressure spiked instantly. The investigation into the chocolate poisoning was crawling forward like a wounded animal—authorities still couldn’t trace who’d purchased the contaminated sweets or identify the supplier. The delivery person wasn’t affiliated with any legitimate business, which complicated the manhunt significantly. Law enforcement would need to analyze security footage from every establishment that carried that particular brand, a process that could drag on for weeks. Meanwhile, my exiled father Marcus remained a ghost in the wind.

"Christ, Daniel, do you have any good news to balance this disaster?" I growled into the phone.

"Actually, yes," Daniel replied smoothly. "Remember those undercover officers I positioned outside the correctional facility? They shadowed Nick the moment he stepped through those gates. We've got eyes on his location and identified his new partner."

"At least something's going our way. Who's backing this piece of street trash?"

"A woman who makes Nick look like an altar boy. She's connected to some mid-level drug pusher that narcotics division has been tracking for months. Our departments are coordinating efforts on this case now."

I felt my temple throb with rising anger. "So this bastard's tangled up with narcotics dealers now? That's what we're dealing with? I'm seriously considering moving Gemma overseas."

"Hold your horses—we don't have confirmation he's working directly with the dealer himself. They served time together before Nick got transferred to minimum security. That's probably how he made contact with the sister. So far, our surveillance shows Nick visited his mother's house, collected several bags, and took up residence at the woman's apartment complex."

"Understood. Anything else I need to know?"

"That covers the immediate situation. But Dominic—given what happened at the beach house and with Nick back on the streets, Gemma needs to stay extremely cautious."

"I'll make sure she understands." I terminated the call, already dreading the conversation ahead with Gemma.

I discovered her barefoot in our kitchen—one of her habits that never failed to charm me. I never walked around without shoes myself, but watching her move freely through our home told me she felt safe and settled. I wrapped my arms around her from behind as she switched off the burner, the rich aroma of our dinner filling the space.

"What culinary masterpiece are you creating?" I murmured against her ear.

"Just putting the finishing touches on dinner," she answered softly.

"Smells amazing. I'm absolutely starving." Her gentle laughter sent warmth through my chest.

After we'd finished eating, I relayed everything Daniel had shared. Predictably, tension crept across her features, though she struggled to maintain composure.

"Songbird, we could take an extended trip to Europe if that would help you feel safer," I offered, already knowing her response.

"Absolutely not, Dominic. Running away hands him exactly what he wants—control over our lives. We'll beef up security and stay alert," Gemma stated with unmistakable determination.

There was nothing left to discuss on that front.

Monday morning at the office brought an unwelcome blast from the past.

"Sugar pie! I came to see my favorite man!" Beatrix occupied the reception area outside my office while Mia and Zoe regarded her with undisguised hostility.

"Oh yes, Sugar pie," Zoe practically hissed. "Looks like the home-wrecker missed the memo about staying away."

"Beatrix, for the love of all that's holy, just pretend I don't exist," I said wearily, already exhausted by this woman's persistence.

"Impossible, darling. You're the great love of my life," Beatrix cooed, rising from her seat to approach me.

"End this madness, Beatrix!" I dodged her advance, strategically placing Zoe between us as a barrier.

"That’s right, you tramp," Zoe snapped venomously. "Cut the crazy act—though you’ve already mastered the tramp routine."

"Mind your own business and keep your mouth shut, you attack dog," Beatrix shot back at Zoe, which prompted a snicker from Mia.

"Who exactly are you calling an attack dog, you piece of trash?" Zoe’s voice escalated as she moved closer to Beatrix.

"Sweetheart, control your guard dog," Beatrix whined pathetically.

"You chose the wrong target to mess with," I replied, feeling perfectly secure behind Zoe’s protective stance.

"Darling, I came here to support you, to stand loyally by your side. Is this the reception I deserve?" Beatrix continued her pitiful performance.

"Support me with what exactly, you delusional woman? When I need support, my future wife provides everything necessary," I responded, genuinely baffled by Beatrix’s refusal to accept reality.

"Future wife?" Genuine confusion flickered across her face.

"Oh please, you stupid bitch!" Zoe exploded. "Everyone knows Dominic and Gemma are planning their wedding."

"Gemma." Beatrix’s voice turned venomous as she spoke the name. "That wedding ceremony will never take place. Not in this lifetime."

Zoe advanced another step toward Beatrix, who instinctively backed away. Then, in a moment that would become legendary in our office, Zoe actually growled, stamped her foot aggressively, and let out a sharp bark. Beatrix fled toward the still-open elevator while Mia and I collapsed into helpless laughter.

"What the hell was that performance, Zoe?" I gasped between fits of laughter.

"What? She called me a guard dog, so I figured I'd prove her point," Zoe replied with complete sincerity.

This woman truly had no boundaries or filters—a quality that made her both terrifying and invaluable in our line of work. Mia and I laughed until our ribs ached at the sheer absurdity of the confrontation.

Chapter 360: Devastating Rejections

Gemma's POV

Ever since Daniel, our family's inside man in the police force, warned me about Nick being released from lockup, I had been living under strict security protocols. My routine became regimented: straight from our fortified compound to my office at Thorne Enterprises' legitimate front, then directly back. No detours, no exposed lunch meetings. Lila had become my constant shadow, while Jude spent most of his time sulking about Nora's reassignment to the Frost Coast operations.

That day brought a rare respite when Bee, Dominic's mother and former wife of the underboss, invited me to lunch. I met her and Andrew at an upscale restaurant in the neutral territory near our financial district headquarters. They looked absolutely radiant together—the way Andrew treated Bee with such reverence made my heart warm, especially knowing how her disastrous first marriage to Marcus, Dominic's father, had been so brutal.

"You two are honestly the perfect match," I announced as I approached their corner table, strategically positioned with clear sightlines to all exits.

Bee's eyes held an unexpected vulnerability. "You really believe that, Gemma?"

"It's not just my opinion—anyone with half a brain can see it," I replied, leaning down to kiss her cheek while discretely scanning the restaurant for potential threats.

Andrew's weathered face creased with genuine happiness. "I couldn't agree more with our future daughter-in-law!"

Once we were settled with our backs to the wall, Bee immediately focused on my expanding belly. "How's my future grandchild treating you?"

"Making me raid every kitchen in the compound! Bee, I swear, nothing satisfies this appetite," I confessed, still amazed by my constant hunger.

She laughed knowingly. "Exactly how I felt carrying Dominic. Already showing the Frost family appetite, I see."

The lunch was delightful despite the underlying tension of our world. Bee mentioned she had already contacted the priest, who had connections to our family's preferred clergy, about the wedding ceremony. We would need to complete the marriage counseling sessions, but everything was falling into place within the family's traditional framework.

After our meal, they escorted me back toward the Thorne building, Andrew's trained eyes constantly sweeping for surveillance. We were nearly at the secure entrance when an unwelcome voice cut through our conversation like a blade.

"Well, well, little Gemma!" Nancy's poisonous tone made my skin crawl. She had clearly been watching, waiting for an opportunity.

I turned, fixing her with the ice-cold stare Dominic had taught me. "If it isn't the family embarrassment. Looking to get eliminated today?" I mimicked her condescending tone with lethal precision.

"Don't overestimate your importance in this organization," she replied with a venomous smile before shifting her predatory attention to Andrew and Bee. "My, my, look who we have here. Found another benefactor, you pathetic old relic?"

Bee's response carried the authority of someone who had survived decades in this life. "My personal affairs are none of your concern, Nancy."

"At least you have expensive taste," Nancy purred, circling Andrew like a shark sensing blood. "The distinguished gentleman is quite appealing. Perhaps we could discuss some private business arrangements." She boldly placed her manicured fingers on Andrew's expensive suit jacket.

Without hesitation, Andrew seized her wrist and forcefully removed her hand. "That will never happen. I don't conduct business with bottom-feeders like yourself. I already have perfection beside me, and I have zero interest in the cheap entertainment that appeals to degenerates like you and that disgraced exile Marcus."

I nearly applauded. Nancy stood frozen, clearly not expecting such a direct rejection from what she assumed was easy prey. Bee's face bloomed with a smile that radiated pure satisfaction—vindication and delight at watching her man put this parasite firmly in her place. But Nancy wasn't someone who accepted defeat gracefully.

"You'll reconsider, handsome," she winked at Andrew with practiced seduction. "Want to know why? Because I'm young, my body is tight and available—everything a dried-up old woman can't provide. I perform services both in business and pleasure that she couldn't even comprehend."

My patience finally shattered. "Please, you've serviced more men than a downtown working girl! Which gutter did you crawl out of today? You're nothing but trash wrapped in designer knockoffs."

"You are extraordinarily cheap," Andrew added with visible disgust. "Don't waste your breath. All you inspire in me is contempt, revulsion, and the desire to have you removed from my sight. Come, darling, let's get Gemma to safety and check on the boys at headquarters."

"Goodbye, family parasite," I smiled sweetly at Nancy as we prepared to leave. Andrew had absolutely destroyed her with the efficiency of a seasoned operator.

As we walked toward the building's security checkpoint, I noticed a dangerous glint in Bee's eyes that told me she wasn't finished. She paused, turned to face Nancy who remained planted on the sidewalk, and delivered her final strike.

"I almost forgot to express my gratitude," she called back. Nancy's face twisted in confusion. "Thank you for taking that perverted waste Marcus off my hands. It's truly the greatest service anyone has ever

provided me." With that declaration, Bee turned with regal dignity and continued walking arm-in-arm with Andrew, the picture of triumphant elegance.

Back in the secure conference room, I grabbed coffee with Lila and Ivy while video-calling Zoe to share the encounter.

"You should have witnessed Dominic's mother in action! She demolished that snake with such class," I recounted with obvious pride.

"I would have paid serious money to see Bee put that viper in her place," Zoe laughed from her surveillance post. "But Gemma, that's not our only problem brewing."

"I know, Dominic mentioned Beatrix showed up at your surveillance location," I said, remembering our morning briefing.

"She waltzed in bold as brass, acting like she still had clearance. And your fiancé? Such a coward—practically hiding behind me, pushing me forward to handle his mess." Zoe could barely contain her amusement.

"I still don't understand why she claimed she was there to support Dominic's operations," I mused, genuinely confused.

"That puzzled me too. But listen carefully—stay on high alert. That witch isn't as harmless as she pretends. She specifically threatened that your wedding won't happen." Zoe's warning immediately sobered the room.

"Speaking of the ceremony..." Ivy leaned forward with anticipation.

"Oh! I almost forgot to update you—I secured appointments at the exclusive bridal boutique," Zoe announced excitedly. "For our entire inner circle. Where's Ruby?"

"In a strategy meeting with Scott and the financial team," Lila responded.

"Well, inform her we're hitting the boutique this weekend. Gemma, unfortunately Nora won't make it back for the wedding," Zoe informed me, and my heart sank slightly. "What are you planning to do about Jude?"

"I'll figure something out. This caught me off guard," I admitted. Perhaps one of the Thorne family daughters could step in—we had excellent relationships with them, and they brought such positive energy to family gatherings.

We spent the next several minutes coordinating wedding security details. Ivy and Zoe were handling all arrangements for me—I would express my preferences, and they would execute them with military precision. Those two formed an unstoppable team that would make any professional event coordinator envious.