Mafia Mask 361

Chapter 361: Blood on Wedding Plans

Gemma’s POV

With Nora unable to attend our wedding as one of my bridesmaids, I asked Dominic’s sisters, Erica and Audrey, if either of them would step in as Jude’s partner. Those two immediately turned it into a competition, arguing playfully before settling on a game of odds or evens. Audrey won, prompting Erica to issue a warning that she wouldn’t let her sister monopolize "the hottie" at the reception. Poor Jude was in for quite an experience with those two Frost sisters, but I figured some distraction would do him good after all the family warfare we’d been through.

The dress fitting at the exclusive boutique included both sisters, who kept everyone in stitches with their antics despite the armed security detail stationed outside.

"Girl, this boutique is fabulous!" Audrey announced dramatically as they arrived, flanked by their usual bodyguards. "Since I’m officially one of your bridesmaids now, we’re planning the most epic bachelorette party you’ve ever imagined."

A shiver ran down my spine thinking about what this wild daughter of a mafia elder might have in store, though I knew whatever it was would be both entertaining and heavily guarded.

Zoe groaned from her position by the window, scanning the street. "Seriously, Audrey’s handling the bachelorette party? God help us all."

"Honey, you and Nadia have the ceremony and reception security covered," Audrey replied with a mischievous wink. "I’ll take care of the fun stuff."

"Hold up," Erica interjected. "We’re handling it together. I’m definitely involved in this."

Nadia laughed, checking her encrypted phone. "Don’t worry, Gemma. If there’s anything these two excel at, it’s throwing unforgettable parties that won’t end up on the FBI’s radar."

"I hadn’t even considered a bachelorette party," I admitted. "But I’m game. Just remember, my grandmother will be in town, so nothing too outrageous, okay?"

"Relax," Erica winked. "Grandma’s going to adore us."

The boutique designer had already sketched my dress based on Zoe’s specifications and the family’s requirements for concealed weapon access, and I fell instantly in love. No question – this was the one. Then came the fun part – selecting the bridesmaids’ dresses.

"What are you looking for, Gemma?" Ivy asked while casually monitoring the street through the boutique’s reinforced windows.

"Light fabrics in pale colors to match our beachfront estate wedding," I explained. With that, they scattered throughout the store, eagerly searching through racks of dresses while their security detail maintained watchful positions.

A while later, chaos reigned as everyone modeled different dresses – colors clashing, some too light, others too dark, fits ranging from too tight to shapeless. They were all giggling at each other’s choices, temporarily forgetting the dangerous world we inhabited.

"This is a disaster," Erica declared, taking charge with the authority that came naturally to Thorne family women. "Audrey, I’ve told you countless times to avoid pleats – they make your butt look enormous!" Everyone erupted in laughter, including Audrey. "Let’s go with candy colors, ladies. It’s totally on-trend for bridesmaids. Step aside, I’ll handle this."

I watched in amazement as Erica confidently selected dresses for everyone with the precision of someone used to making life-or-death decisions. When they lined up in front of me, the visual was stunning. She truly knew her fashion, a skill honed by years of attending high-stakes mafia social events.

"Erica, you nailed it!" I praised. "Are you all happy with these?" They all nodded enthusiastically, clearly impressed by how cohesive they looked together.

"High five, sis!" Erica held up her hand for me to slap. These two were not only fun but seriously talented with fashion and firearms.

Erica went the extra mile, selecting perfect dresses for my mom, Bee, and my grandmother – who would look magnificent in a lovely light green shade that wouldn't show bloodstains. By the time we left the boutique, everything was settled except for my final dress fitting.

Outside on the sidewalk, we continued chatting excitedly about wedding plans and the mysterious bachelorette party Dominic's sisters were concocting. I noticed Lila step away to answer her phone while our security team maintained their protective formation around our group.

Suddenly, a scream pierced the air. I whipped around to see one of Caleb's security guards holding Lila protectively while Hunter sprinted down the street in pursuit of someone, his hand reaching for his concealed weapon.

The guard brought Lila back to our group, his face grim.

"What happened?" I asked, frantically checking Lila for injuries while Zoe immediately got on her radio to coordinate with additional security.

"A street thief tried to snatch the young lady's phone and slashed her arm with a knife," the security guard explained, his trained eyes scanning for additional threats. "Could be a random robbery or reconnaissance. It's not serious, but I couldn't pull her away fast enough to prevent the cut."

"This territory gets more dangerous every day," Erica commented, her hand instinctively moving to her designer purse where I knew she kept a small pistol.

Hunter returned, breathing heavily and clearly frustrated. "Miss Gemma, I couldn't catch him. He escaped on a motorcycle through the back alleys."

"Thank you for trying," I said, pulling Lila into a hug. "We need to get you to the family's private medical facility. We'll call Daniel on the way."

The girls all volunteered to accompany us, but I knew the waiting area would soon be overrun with their husbands, boyfriends, and armed escorts. I convinced them to return to their secured locations, promising updates. In the armored car, Lila continued crying, clearly shaken by the experience.

"Thank goodness it wasn't worse," I said, examining her wound, which appeared superficial. "Could have been a setup for something bigger."

"Those security guards saved me," she said, calming slightly. "I was talking to Daniel when it happened."

"Oh lord, he must be mobilizing half the police force right now. I'd better call him." Daniel needed reassurance before he did something that would draw federal attention.

"Miss Gemma," Hunter called from the front seat, "I've informed Mr. Dominic, and he's contacted Inspector Martinez. They'll meet us at the medical facility."

"Thank you, Hunter," I replied gratefully before turning back to comfort Lila.

At the private clinic, Daniel was already waiting, pacing anxiously like a caged predator. When he saw us, he rushed forward and enveloped Lila in his arms.

"Little one! I nearly lost my mind when I heard you scream through the phone," he said, holding her tightly with hands that had seen too much violence.

"Songbird, are you both alright?" Dominic asked as he entered with his usual commanding presence, coming straight to me. I nodded in confirmation. "Good. Andrew is waiting for us in his office."

After checking in with the clinic's security protocols, we headed for the elevator. Daniel held Lila close the entire time. His phone rang persistently, and after ignoring it several times, he finally answered after multiple calls just as the elevator doors opened to Dr. Taylor's floor.

"FUCK IT! FIGURE IT OUT, I'M NOT COMING!" he shouted into the phone before hanging up and immediately dialing Inspector Adler. "Inspector, I'm at the clinic with Lila and need to turn off my phone." He paused to listen. "She's fine, just a street robbery and a cut on her arm. After she's treated, we're heading to the safe house, but I need to turn off my phone, so if you need me, send someone to my location." Another pause. "Yes, exactly because of that situation." He listened again. "I understand. See you." Daniel powered off his phone while we all exchanged knowing glances, understanding that some police business was too dangerous to discuss.

After Lila received several stitches in her forearm and was cleared by the family doctor, we all returned to our respective safe houses. Exhausted and hungry, I took a long shower, ate something light, and fell into bed in Dominic's fortified penthouse, immediately drifting into deep sleep.

I jolted awake from a terrifying nightmare in which Lila had been killed during the robbery, part of a larger attack on our family. In my dream, a phone kept ringing incessantly, and as I regained consciousness, I realized a phone actually was ringing.

"Gemma," Dominic mumbled sleepily beside me, his hand instinctively moving toward the nightstand where his weapon lay. "Your phone's ringing."

I grabbed my encrypted phone from the nightstand and checked the screen – an unknown number. My hands started trembling, and my breathing became rapid and shallow. In our world, unknown calls at this hour usually meant death was calling.

Chapter 362: Voice of Terror

Dominic's POV

I took the encrypted phone from Gemma's trembling hands and switched it to speaker without hesitation. The tension in our secure safe house was suffocating as we waited for the voice that had been haunting my woman for months.

"Well, well, well, Gemma baby! Woohoo! Guess who's calling?" A disturbing laugh crackled through the speaker, the kind that made my trigger finger itch. "Sweet little Gemma, won't you talk to your old friend? Getting all emotional on me?"

Gemma's face drained of color, but she managed to keep her voice steady despite the fear I could see in her dark eyes. "How did you get this number, Nick?"

"Oh, princess, don't you know?" Another sick laugh followed, making my blood pressure spike dangerously. "That pretty little friend of yours Lila was kind enough to share it with me today."

"Was it you? You sick bastard!" Gemma's composure finally cracked, fury replacing fear as her hands clenched into fists.

"Guilty as charged, sweetheart. I had one of my boys pay her a visit today." His voice was dripping with the kind of twisted satisfaction that made me want to put a bullet between his eyes. "Too bad my guy couldn't finish the job like I told him to. Lila got lucky this time."

Watching Gemma struggle not to completely break down made rage burn through my veins like acid. She whispered, "You're nothing but a psychotic animal, Nick."

"Psychotic about you, baby girl! This little incident today was just a friendly reminder that there's nowhere you can hide from me. You belong to me, Gemma! And I'm gonna drag you back to where you belong, even if I have to go through your rich mafia boyfriend."

"You're completely insane!" Gemma's control was slipping fast, tears starting to stream down her cheeks.

"Crazy in love with you, princess! Today's little knife party was just a warm-up. Next time that interfering bitch dies for real. But if you want to keep your precious mommy, your little girlfriends, and your mafia boyfriend breathing, you'll come crawling back to me where you belong."

My hands were already moving toward the gun holstered under my jacket. This street rat had just threatened my family, and in our world, that was a death sentence.

"You'll never touch any of them, and I will never come back to you. You'll never put your filthy hands on me again." Gemma's tears were flowing freely now, but her voice carried the kind of steel that made me fall in love with her in the first place.

"We'll see about that, princess. We'll see real soon." The line went dead with an ominous click.

The moment the connection ended, Gemma collapsed into heart-wrenching sobs. I pulled her against my chest immediately, wrapping my arms around her shaking form as she buried her face in my shirt. My hand moved in slow circles across her back while my mind was already calculating exactly how I was going to make Nick suffer before I put him in the ground.

When her crying finally subsided to quiet sniffles, I pressed my lips to the top of her head. "Songbird, let me get you that chamomile tea. Amber will keep you company."

"You don't have to take care of me like this, Dominic," she protested weakly, though she made no move to leave my arms.

"Yes, I absolutely do. Hot tea and those butter cookies you love are the only things that calm you down when you get worked up like this." My attempt to lighten the mood earned me a small, watery smile that made my chest tighten.

Amber was already padding over to the edge of our bed, pressing his massive head against her leg with that uncanny ability he had to sense when she needed comfort. That dog was better therapy than half the shrinks in the city.

The next morning, after dropping Gemma off at the family's legitimate front office where she worked, I promised to have one of my men deliver her a clean phone by lunch. I kept her compromised device with me as I drove straight to the precinct to meet with Detective Daniel, one of our most reliable assets in the police department. He was going to lose his mind when he found out Nick was behind the attack on Lila.

"Dominic, here this early? That's not like you." Daniel's surprise was obvious as I walked into his cluttered office in the back of the building.

"Morning, Daniel. I would've called ahead, but you had your phone turned off all last night." I studied his exhausted face, noting the stress lines around his eyes. "What was that about anyway?"

He ran a hand through his disheveled dark hair and rubbed his stubbled jaw. "The clusterfuck that's about to explode in my face. Christ, Dominic, why does everything in this city have to get so goddamn complicated?"

"Well, they're about to get a hell of a lot more complicated with the information I brought you."

He looked up at me with a deep scowl. "Just go ahead and drive the knife in deeper, why don't you?"

"Funny you should mention knives, because that’s exactly what I’m here to talk about."

"Did Gemma or any of the security detail remember anything else about the attacker?"

"Gemma got a call from Nick in the middle of the night."

"What does that piece of shit have to do with anything?" Confusion flickered across his weathered face before understanding dawned like a thunderstorm. "Wait a minute. How the hell does he have her new secured number?"

"Because the attack on Lila wasn’t random street violence. Nick orchestrated the whole thing."

Daniel’s fist slammed into his metal desk hard enough to rattle the coffee mug sitting on top, his fury unmistakable and immediate. I raised my hand to keep him from exploding completely. "There’s more." I quickly recounted every word of Nick’s threatening phone call and slid Gemma’s compromised phone across his desk.

"At least now we have his current number. I can push for a wiretap authorization given the escalation in violence." Daniel sighed heavily, his shoulders sagging under the weight of this new development.

"When they told me our favorite tech mogul was gracing our humble station house again, I had to see it with my own eyes." Detective Inspector Adler walked in with his characteristic easy swagger. "Dominic, thinking about switching careers and joining the force?"

I managed a genuine smile for the veteran detective. "Even if I wanted to, Adler, I’d make the world’s worst cop."

"Well, considering the amount of trouble you family associates seem to attract, you’d definitely be the biggest target for every criminal organization in the city." Adler’s infectious laugh filled the room, and despite the gravity of our situation, I found myself chuckling along.

Daniel quickly brought Adler up to speed on my visit, and the detective's expression sharpened immediately at the mention of wiretap possibilities.

"A surveillance authorization could be exactly what we need to jumpstart this investigation, which has been moving at a snail's pace. Your father vanished without a trace, Nick's been ghost for weeks, and we still haven't confirmed whether he was behind those poisoned chocolates that almost killed Gemma." Adler ticked off each point on his fingers methodically.

"So basically, you still don't know anything concrete." I couldn't keep the frustration and growing desperation out of my voice, terrified this nightmare might drag on indefinitely.

"It's not quite that simple, Dominic. We're not completely incompetent here." Adler's smile held a hint of something mysterious that caught my attention.

"Sorry, Adler, I didn't mean it like that. But it's incredibly frustrating to be stuck in this dangerous mess for months without making any real progress toward ending it." I tried to explain my mounting sense of helplessness without insulting their professional capabilities.

"I understand your frustration completely, Dominic. And you're not wrong about our lack of visible progress. But I was actually just coming to brief Daniel on some fresh intelligence we received overnight. Lucky for us that you're here, because we might need your particular expertise to make sense of it." Adler settled into the chair beside me, his expression turning deadly serious.

Chapter 363: Ghosts Return Home

Dominic's POV

The frustration gnawed at my gut as I sat in the back room of the Thorne family's police precinct safe house, feeling like I was drowning in loose ends. Neither Marcus nor that street rat Nick had been permanently dealt with, and the latter was still circling Gemma like a rabid dog. Detective Adler sat across from me at the scarred wooden table, his weathered face showing the kind of sympathy only another soldier could understand. At least he had some intelligence that might give us a fighting chance in this bloody chess game.

"What have you got for us, Adler?" Daniel asked, leaning forward in his chair with the predatory focus that made him one of our most effective cleaners.

"Let’s start with our surveillance on the street scum," Adler began, pulling out a manila folder. "Nick hasn’t left his current rat hole since we arranged his release from county lockup. As we discussed, he’s holed up with the woman who was visiting him inside—clearly his new meal ticket."

While Adler spoke, my mind drifted to the legitimate storefront where Gemma had been working before I pulled her into our world. There had been someone there—a colleague who had connections running back to that piece of garbage Nick.

"Do we have a name for this woman?" I interrupted, my voice carrying the edge that made lesser men flinch. "Nick had some bitch at Gemma’s workplace feeding him information."

Adler nodded with the grim satisfaction of a man who’d done his homework. "We leaned on that individual—Vanessa, if memory serves. She was making regular trips to see him during his stretch, but he cut her loose. Shortly after, he started getting visits from a woman named Nancy Donovan, sister to a small-time dealer who’s been stepping on our territory in the narcotics trade."

He started reaching for a surveillance photograph, but I didn’t need to see her face. The moment he said that cursed name, recognition hit me like a shotgun blast to the chest. The universe apparently had a sick sense of humor when it came to dragging ghosts from my past.

"She’s my ex-girlfriend," I stated, my voice flat as a blade. Both Daniel and Adler stared at me with expressions that shifted from surprise to grim understanding. "The whore my father abandoned our family for."

"Well, I’ll be damned," Daniel exhaled, running a hand through his dark hair. "Talk about all the chickens coming home to roost. Isn’t she the one who’s been trying to crawl back into your bed?"

"The very same," I confirmed, feeling the familiar throb of a headache building behind my temples like approaching thunder. "Back to poison everything she touches."

Adler scratched his grizzled chin thoughtfully. "This complicates the game board significantly. A psychotic ex-boyfriend and a vindictive ex-lover working different angles—that’s a powder keg waiting to blow. We need to ensure this woman doesn’t get within a mile of Gemma."

"She only made contact with Gemma once," I pointed out, though my instincts were screaming that once was already too many times. "Maybe she doesn't even realize Gemma is the same woman who was tangled up with Nick."

"Possibly. From our intelligence gathering, Stevie was the connector between them. He and Nick formed a tight bond during their shared time in the system. But we can't afford to gamble on maybes—it was almost certainly Nancy behind those death threats Gemma received. We'll keep eyes on her," Adler emphasized with the certainty of a man who'd learned not to underestimate enemies.

"Agreed. I'm not taking chances with Gemma's safety. I'll brief her on this development," I nodded curtly. "But what about Marcus? Any movement on that front?"

Adler's expression darkened like storm clouds gathering. "The bastard's staying deep underground. I'm itching to put that traitor in the ground where he belongs."

"That makes three of us," Daniel added, his voice carrying the cold promise of violence that made him so effective at his job.

"There's one more piece to this puzzle," Adler continued, shifting gears with practiced efficiency. "We analyzed security footage from stores selling that specific chocolate brand and compiled a list of everyone who purchased boxes of liqueur chocolates like the ones delivered to Gemma, within the timeframe before she received hers. No immediately obvious suspects jumped out, but I want you and Gemma to review the list—you might spot a connection we'd miss. Fortunately, it's not exactly flying off the shelves, so the list isn't overwhelming."

"Let me see it," I demanded, extending my hand.

I flipped through all ten pages methodically, scanning each name with the focus of a predator hunting prey. Nothing triggered my instincts until one particular name seemed to burn itself into my retinas. It had to be coincidence—surely she wouldn't be that reckless. I continued through the remaining pages, but that was the only name that registered. The possibility seemed completely insane.

"You've found something," Adler observed, his experienced cop's eyes catching the subtle shift in my body language. "Who is it?"

"I recognized a name, Adler, but it would be completely irrational," I argued, though deep down I knew better than to dismiss any possibility in this game. "She couldn’t possibly be that stupid."

"My friend, desperation makes people do things that defy all logic. Some individuals will burn down the world to get what they want," Adler stated with the grim wisdom of someone who’d seen humanity at its worst. I knew he was right—I’d seen it myself too many times.

"Beatrix Atkins," I revealed with a heavy sigh, watching Daniel’s eyebrows shoot up in recognition.

"That psychotic socialite?" Daniel asked with disbelief.

"The very same," I confirmed, then proceeded to explain Beatrix’s twisted history to Adler, whose expression grew increasingly incredulous with each detail.

When I finished, Adler shook his head slowly. "I’d really love to know where you and your associates keep finding these unhinged women." Despite the gravity of the situation, I couldn’t suppress a dark chuckle.

"Could Beatrix possibly be connected to Nick and Nancy?" Daniel questioned, his tactical mind already working angles.

"Highly doubtful. They despised each other," I replied. "But Beatrix’s father maintains close business relationships with Marcus."

Adler’s eyes lit up with predatory interest. "Now that’s an angle we can exploit."

"I should go," I said, rising from my chair. "I’ve taken enough of your time, and I need to bring Gemma and the others up to speed on all this."

"Dominic," Daniel called out, sliding a secure phone across the table, "give Gemma her communication device back, and don’t change her number again. We need evidence against Nick. He’ll make contact again, and we’ll be monitoring every word."

I didn’t like using Gemma as bait, but if it became necessary, I’d make damn sure I was close enough to paint the walls with anyone who threatened her. As I left our police safe house, I realized I was spending far too much time coordinating defensive strategies lately. I missed the simpler days when my biggest concern was pursuing Gemma through shopping districts, trying to claim her heart through sheer determination rather than protecting it from the ghosts of my past.

Chapter 364: Parking Lot Justice

Dominic’s POV

I headed directly to Gemma’s workplace after my tense meeting with our compromised contacts in law enforcement. My plan was simple—take her to lunch and explain everything that was unfolding with the family’s security situation. When I arrived, Xavier was hovering around Gemma’s desk, his usual jokes flying.

"Is the family bleeding money, Dominic?" Xavier flashed that mischievous grin of his.

"Where would you get that idea? Our operations are more profitable than ever, thank you very much," I replied flatly, still carrying the weight of my morning dealing with corrupt cops and federal pressure.

"Yet here you are again, almost like you’re desperately seeking legitimate employment." Xavier chuckled while I shot him an exasperated look—he was clearly enjoying himself at my expense.

"You’re impossible, Xavier," I groaned.

"And you’re in too foul a mood to be around my future nephew." Xavier maintained his teasing smile as Gemma joined in the laughter.

"After the morning I’ve had dealing with badge-wearing parasites, even you would be stressed," I remarked, dragging a chair over to collapse into it.

Xavier’s expression shifted to concern. "What’s the situation, Dominic?"

"Too much heat. I came to grab Gemma for lunch and fill her in on everything Daniel and Adler discovered through their contacts." My exhaustion was evident in my voice.

"Let's gather the entire crew then. You can brief us all at once. I'll send the messages." Xavier took initiative, which seemed like the better option for family security.

"I'll call Zoe to join us." I fished my phone from my pocket and dialed her number.

By the time we settled at our usual restaurant—one of the family's protected establishments—we were only waiting on Zoe. When she finally arrived, she stormed through the place like a category five hurricane. Her fury was palpable as she practically threw herself into a chair, huffing dramatically and shooting me death glares that made me shrink back instinctively.

"What's eating you, crazy girl?" Caleb asked bluntly, probably the only one brave enough to confront her volatile mood.

"What's eating me, Thorne? That treacherous bastard Marcus is what's eating me! Dominic, I swear I'm going to rip your father's tongue out and feed it to Gemma's caramel-colored dog as a chew toy." Zoe was absolutely seething.

"Don't stop at his tongue—take what's between his legs too," Xavier offered his typical unfiltered opinion.

"My dog doesn't play with garbage," Gemma quipped with a laugh.

"Where did you encounter him?" I asked, puzzled since our street contacts hadn't been able to locate the disgraced former family member.

"The snake was lurking in the company parking lot. When our security approached, he ran like the coward he is." Zoe grabbed Xavier's whiskey and downed it in one swift motion.

"What did he do? Say? Threaten?" I pressed, feeling drained by my father's continued attempts to undermine family operations.

"Called me a stupid, interfering woman and threatened to teach me a lesson about disrespecting my elders. The nerve of him—he actually tried to hit me!" Zoe fumed.

Jude looked alarmed. "Did he hurt you, Zo?"

"Wake up, Wright! I'm Zoe Miller. That washed-up has-been couldn't touch a hair on my head. I beat him senseless!" Zoe's lips curled into a half-smile at the memory.

"Stop right there, Zo. I need visual evidence of this," I said, feeling a small spark of satisfaction at the thought of my father finally facing consequences.

"What are you planning?" she asked.

"I'm requesting the surveillance footage from our security network. Order yourself a drink—you're officially off duty for the rest of the day." I smiled at the fierce woman who'd completely revolutionized our information operations.

I messaged our head of security requesting footage of Zoe's confrontation with Marcus. He promptly sent the video, and to our delight, the audio was captured too through our advanced surveillance system.

We watched in amazement as the scene unfolded on my phone. Zoe truly had beaten Marcus, starting by twisting his arm when he raised it to strike her. Each blow she delivered came with a creative insult while he howled in pain. The crowning moment was her direct hit to his nose—clearly broken. A green car suddenly appeared, honking urgently, allowing Marcus to break free and jump inside before our security could intervene.

"Could you see who was driving the car?" I asked, feeling like I'd seen that vehicle before but couldn't place where in our territory surveillance.

"No clear view of the driver. But he'll need medical attention—I guarantee I broke that perverted traitor's nose." Zoe smiled triumphantly.

"That was obvious from here," Xavier grinned at her. "Were you born this fierce?"

"Xavier, darling, I was born a Miller. I don’t tolerate insults, I don’t let people walk over me, I don’t take garbage from anyone, and I definitely don’t bow to disgraced family rejects," Zoe stated matter-of-factly. "That’s exactly why I learned combat training."

"Clearly—you fight like you belong in our line of work," Caleb laughed.

I forwarded the footage to Daniel, hoping he could identify the car through DMV connections and alert our contacts at local hospitals. Maybe we’d finally get lucky and Marcus would be arrested or better yet, handled through family channels.

As lunch continued, I detailed everything I’d discovered through our law enforcement contacts. When I mentioned Nancy’s connection to Nick, Gemma’s eyes widened noticeably.

"That explains why she keeps calling me ’little Gemma,’" Gemma remarked, as if solving a dangerous puzzle.

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"Nick is literally the only person who calls me ’little Gemma,’ and that woman uses it every time she sees me," Gemma explained.

"Every time? Has she approached you on occasions besides when Jude was with you?" I questioned, dreading the answer and the security implications.

"Oh no! Honey, don’t be upset, but with everything happening, I completely forgot to tell you." Gemma placed her hand reassuringly over mine.

After Gemma revealed her undisclosed encounters with Nancy, and after my complaints subsided under her insistence that she genuinely forgot amid all the family chaos, Xavier prompted me to continue

sharing what I'd learned through our intelligence network. Everyone was shocked when I mentioned the possibility that Beatrix had sent the poisoned chocolates to Gemma.

"That treacherous bitch has crossed the line!" Zoe snarled. "You know what? Since I have the afternoon free, I could track her down and redirect my stress onto that French bulldog face of hers."

"Zoe, please don't start a war!" I pleaded. "Our people will handle the investigation through proper channels. Why not spend your afternoon at that amazing spa you discovered?"

"Hmm, good point." Zoe closed her eyes thoughtfully. "I'll go realign my chakras that your father disrupted. Who's joining me?"

"Honey, unlike you, we have a boss who isn't as generous as my sweetheart, and we need to maintain our cover," Gemma teased.

"Hey, stop that, Gemma! My husband is extremely kind!" Ivy quickly defended Caleb.

"Ladies, you know you don't have rigid schedules in our operations. You're welcome to join Zo at the spa, my treat," Caleb offered before kissing his wife.

"Well, honey, now he's being nicer than you," Gemma remarked, making everyone laugh despite the serious family business we'd been discussing.

"Let's do this, ladies!" Zoe stood up decisively.

"I'm sitting this one out," Lila announced, finishing her juice. "I have too many pending tasks and don't want them piling up."

"Come on, Little June, don't be boring," Zoe protested using Lila's family nickname.

"Next time, Zo," Lila smiled politely. Despite Caleb's reassurances, she wouldn't budge. Lila clearly had something else on her mind beyond work.

"Well then, let’s go. I’ll call Phoebe and Brenda," Gemma said after exchanging a meaningful glance with Lila, smoothly redirecting everyone’s attention. Something was definitely going on there, and in our world, secrets could be dangerous.

Chapter 365: Plans Gone Wrong

Nancy’s POV

What an absolute disaster Marcus had turned out to be! We had orchestrated this operation down to the last detail, and the old fool couldn’t even follow basic instructions. And who was this wild woman who had beaten him to a pulp? Christ, there were Thorne family surveillance units patrolling the area! I needed to extract this pathetic excuse for a former capo before we both ended up in body bags. I gunned the engine, pulled up beside the chaos, and laid on the horn. The idiot finally managed to break free from his attacker and stumbled into my car.

"Drive, Nancy! For the love of God, move! That psychopath is completely unhinged!" Marcus wheezed between labored breaths, looking like he’d been run over by a truck with blood streaming from his mangled nose. I couldn’t suppress my laughter.

"Who the hell was that woman?" I chuckled, taking in his pathetic condition.

"Zoe Miller, some corporate princess and your precious Dominic’s intelligence coordinator."

"A trust fund baby fighting like she’s fresh out of Rikers? Just when I thought I’d seen it all... She really worked you over." His disgusted expression as he examined his battered reflection in the visor mirror only made me laugh harder.

"That lunatic shattered my nose! Get me to a clinic, somewhere off the grid where no one from the family will spot us."

"Damn it, Marcus! Why couldn’t you just execute the plan as designed? You were supposed to wait for Dominic and stage an assault on me. He would have gone ballistic seeing you attack me, and I would’ve had the perfect opening to reel him back in by playing the helpless victim."

"Listen, sweetheart, nothing brings me more satisfaction than getting under my son's skin, but I've had unfinished business with that woman for some time. I wanted to send her a message. I just didn't anticipate her fighting like a caged animal with fists of concrete. Christ..." Marcus winced as he gingerly probed his split lip.

"Care to elaborate on this unfinished business?"

"Because she interfered with my operations and got me permanently blacklisted from the organization." The venom in his voice was unmistakable.

"Well, I'll be damned—she's got more fight in her than most soldiers, certainly more than you!" I couldn't help but respect this Zoe character, despite our circumstances.

"She's nothing but a rabid attack dog!" Marcus spat with fury.

"You still should have stuck to the blueprint." My irritation with him was reaching dangerous levels.

"Yeah, whatever. We'll circle back for your amateur theatrics another day. Right now, get me medical attention."

I couldn't let this slide. The operation would have been flawless. Marcus would corner me in the parking structure, appearing to force himself on me—his standard method with women who spurned his advances. Dominic would witness the scene and charge in to protect me from his father's predatory behavior. One thing I knew with absolute certainty: he despised his father more than anything breathing. He'd come to my rescue, and I'd capitalize on the moment to seduce him, playing the traumatized, vulnerable damsel. He wouldn't be able to resist my manipulation.

But this incompetent has-been had to sabotage everything, as always. This wasn't his first time undermining my schemes. When I initially left Dominic to align with Marcus, I never imagined he'd prove so utterly worthless, surrendering all assets and control of the organization to Dominic. He claimed he had no alternative because this Bee woman held damaging intelligence over him. Beyond limiting me to an allowance that barely sustained the lavish lifestyle I was accustomed to, he was unbearable to endure. He fancied himself irresistible to women, but he was just a repulsive old man who was hopeless in bed and lazy beyond measure. I only managed to tolerate him for some time, and that was solely because he'd occasionally find other women to occupy his attention, granting me blessed respite.

I was enduring this nuisance again purely because it served my agenda. Once I no longer required his services, Caleb would handle his disposal, and he'd be fertilizing soil six feet underground!

"I'll take you to that discrete clinic near the safe house. It's off the books. Not exactly five-star treatment, but it's untraceable and no one from the family will recognize you. My contact in legal says there's a federal warrant with your name on it—you need to maintain a low profile."

"Yeah, I'm aware. Damn underground medical facility. My nose is going to heal crooked." His constant whining was insufferable, but that's what he earned for crossing the wrong person.

We reached the medical facility, and fortunately, a nurse I'd cultivated was working the shift. I had a quiet word with her, slipped her some cash, and she placed Marcus in a secluded corner for treatment without paperwork while she located a doctor. We waited in the emergency bay, where the treatment areas were separated by curtains on the sides, but remained open at the front.

"Nancy! Nancy! Close the curtain, immediately!" Marcus ducked low and stared at me in panic.

"Handle it yourself!" I remained planted in my corner chair.

"Just close the damn thing, Nancy. That woman recognizes me!"

"Which woman?" I surveyed the area and spotted three women nearby.

"The tall brunette with the updo. That's Gemma's mother."

"Gemma? Nick's Gemma?" Just my rotten timing!

"Yeah, Gemma—Nick's, Dominic's, and mine." Marcus attempted to conceal his face.

"Stay put, old man, and wait for the doctor. I'll be right back." I stood up, pulling the curtain closed behind me.

"Where are you going?" I heard Marcus call as I departed, but I ignored him.

"Excuse me," I approached the nurse who was conversing with the homewrecker's mother. "Could you direct me to where I might find coffee around here?"

"There's a cafeteria on the third floor. You can take the elevator over there," the nurse indicated.

"I'm heading there myself if you'd like company," offered Gemma's mother. Her helpfulness made my objective easier—I didn't even need to manufacture a reason to initiate contact.

"Oh, absolutely, please," I displayed my most innocent demeanor. "I always get disoriented in medical facilities, everything's so sterile, all the hallways look identical."

"You're absolutely right, they should incorporate some color into these walls, shouldn't they?" She smiled warmly. Disgusting! I loathed genuinely kind people—such pathetic weakness.

"That would be so much more welcoming," I smiled back. "Do you work here?"

"No, but I'm here frequently. I'm a pharmaceutical sales representative."

"How fascinating. I'm here with my father, who took a fall and broke his nose, can you imagine?"

"Poor man! But aside from his nose, is he otherwise uninjured?"

"Yes, he'll recover," I smiled sweetly. "I've been spending time with him since I lost my position, but times are challenging."

"I completely understand. What was your previous role?"

"I worked as a dental office coordinator, but the practice closed when the dentist died and they shuttered operations."

"Oh my! How terrible!"

A while later, I had established excellent rapport with this insufferably pleasant woman, and she even offered to assist me in finding employment. That could prove extremely valuable. We exchanged contact information and parted ways. Nick would be absolutely thrilled to learn about my new connection.

I returned to where I'd abandoned Marcus, discovering that the doctor had already examined him and was providing discharge instructions and a prescription. We exited the facility, with that pest still complaining endlessly.

"Hell! My nose will be permanently disfigured because they don't have a qualified surgeon here."

"Enough, Marcus! When we successfully manipulate Dominic and you're living comfortably somewhere in Europe, you can reconstruct that nose." His griping was testing my final nerve.

"You're so touchy, Nancy." He glowered at me. "Where did you disappear to anyway?"

"Building connections," I replied simply.

"You slut! You were probably screwing some doctor."

"Shut your mouth unless you want another visit to emergency care." I finally erupted, my patience completely depleted.

Chapter 366: Deadly Deception

Gemma's POV

The past several weeks had been a whirlwind of wedding preparations for what would be the most heavily guarded mafia ceremony the city had ever witnessed. Everything was falling into place under the

watchful eyes of our family security - the private chapel, the bulletproof limousines, the reception venue swept daily for listening devices. My bridesmaids Erica and Audrey had been practically vibrating with excitement about whatever elaborate bachelorette party they had planned, complete with armed escorts and background checks on every vendor.

Earlier that day, Dominic had sent word through one of our runners that he would be late returning to our penthouse. Xavier had organized an emergency strategy meeting with the family's inner circle - what they euphemistically called "poker night" when discussing business over encrypted phones. I had considered having dinner with Mom and Ryder at their new safe house instead. I hadn't seen them in days, not since we'd moved them to the family compound for their protection.

Just as I was packing up my things at the family's legitimate front company where I now worked as Dominic's financial coordinator, a courier appeared beside my desk. Not the usual company messenger - this one wore the distinctive black suit and earpiece that marked him as family security.

"Priority delivery for you, Mrs. Frost," he said, placing a single red rose with a small envelope on my desk with the reverence reserved for family communications.

My heart fluttered despite the formal tone. This had Dominic written all over it. Even in the middle of family crisis management, he never forgot the romantic gestures that made my pulse race. I opened the sealed envelope and read the typed message on family letterhead:

"My goddess, I miss you. Meet me at the Ambassador Hotel, room 1575, tonight at seven o'clock. I have something important to show you. Come alone - family eyes only."

A smile spread across my face as I checked my watch. Dominic's private meetings were always memorable - secure hotel suites, private chefs cleared by family security, intimate dinners where he could drop his Capo mask and just be mine. Whatever intelligence he needed to share tonight, I knew he would make it special.

I hurried to the executive bathroom to freshen up. A quick touch of the bulletproof lipstick Audrey had given me, a fluff of my hair, and I was ready to meet my dangerous fiancé for whatever classified evening he had orchestrated.

On the drive over in my armored sedan, my encrypted phone rang. Vincenzo's code name flashed across the screen.

"Hi, beautiful nephew," I answered, switching to our family frequency.

"Auntie Gemma! How's the future Mrs. Capo today?" His warm voice came through the secure line.

"Surviving another day in paradise. And you?"

"Dying for some normal food," he said with that dramatic flair that reminded me so much of Dominic. "You've been promising to take me to that old-school diner forever - the one with the vintage cars and no surveillance equipment. I'm calling to cash in on that promise tonight."

I laughed. "You're right. Every time we plan something normal, another family emergency comes up."

"Exactly! And I bet my little cousin is craving something that didn't come from a chef with a security clearance," he added, not above using my unborn baby as leverage.

"How about tomorrow instead, Vincenzo? I can't tonight."

"And why not tonight, if I may ask?" His tone shifted slightly - the family training showing through his teenage casualness.

"Because your uncle has arranged a private briefing. He sent me a message asking me to meet him at the Ambassador. You know how these family meetings go - all very cloak and dagger."

Vincenzo paused, and I could hear the subtle sound of him checking something on his end. "Well, I certainly can't compete with Uncle Dominic's classified business. Tomorrow it is, then. But Gemma... did you verify that message through proper channels?"

"Vincenzo, it came with family letterhead and a courier with the right clearance. Your uncle is nothing if not thorough about security protocols."

"Of course. Have a wonderful evening, gorgeous. And remember - family first, trust second."

The call ended just as we pulled up to the imposing entrance of the Ambassador, one of the few hotels in the city that maintained the kind of discretion our family required. My security detail, led by Hunter, opened the door for me.

"Hunter, I'm meeting Dominic inside for family business, so you and the team can maintain perimeter positions," I said, stepping onto the sidewalk with practiced confidence.

He hesitated, his hand moving instinctively toward his concealed weapon. "Are you certain, Mrs. Frost? Standard protocol requires us to sweep the location first, especially with recent threats to family members."

I glanced at my watch. "Actually, I'm running late, and you know how Dominic feels about punctuality during operations. Maintain surveillance from here - I'll signal if I need extraction."

"Copy that. But please remember the panic protocols. Any sign of trouble, and we move in immediately."

With a nod, I entered the hotel's elegant lobby. The desk staff recognized me immediately - our family had long-standing arrangements with the Ambassador's management. They directed me to the private elevator without requiring additional identification.

My heart raced with anticipation as I knocked on room 1575 using the coded pattern Dominic had taught me. The door opened almost immediately, and I walked in, expecting to see the usual setup for a family briefing - encrypted computers, tactical maps, secure communication equipment.

Instead, I found myself staring at an ordinary hotel room with no security measures in place.

The door clicked shut behind me with the finality of a trap springing closed. I turned, expecting to see Dominic's familiar silhouette, and instead found myself face to face with the cold, calculating eyes of Marcus Frost - the man whose betrayal had nearly destroyed our family.

"Gemma, darling daughter-in-law," his smile was all predator, no warmth. "What a pleasure to finally have you all to myself."

"Marcus." I kept my voice steady, reaching for the panic button hidden in my bracelet. "Where is Dominic?"

"Oh, he has no idea you're here." He casually walked to the minibar, pouring himself whiskey with hands that had once been stained with family blood. "Amazing how easy it is to forge family communications when you know all the right protocols. Though I must admit, I didn't expect the great Gemma Valance to fall for such a simple deception."

My blood turned to ice as the full scope of his betrayal became clear. "What do you want?"

His eyes gleamed with malicious satisfaction. "What I've always wanted - to destroy Dominic piece by piece. And what better way than to take the one thing he values more than his own life?"

I backed toward the window, my fingers frantically working the panic button. "You're insane if you think you'll get away with this. Brenda, Phoebe, Zander, Nadia - they all know where I am."

"Actually, they don't. See, I've been watching, learning your patterns. Tonight, everyone thinks you're somewhere else." He moved closer, and I could smell the alcohol on his breath mixed with something darker - obsession.

"Stay away from me," I warned, my voice stronger than I felt.

"Or what? You'll call for help?" He laughed, a sound that made my skin crawl. "This room is soundproofed, darling. Perfect for what I have planned."

He lunged forward, and I dodged, grabbing a heavy glass vase from the side table. "Don't touch me!"

"Feisty. I like that." His hand shot out, catching my wrist in a grip that made me gasp. "Dominic's going to receive such an interesting video tonight. His precious wife, compromised and broken."

Terror flooded my system as he forced me backward toward the bed. I swung the vase with my free hand, connecting with his shoulder, but he barely flinched.

"You're going to regret that," he snarled, his grip tightening until I cried out and dropped the vase.

I kicked at him, my heels finding their mark, but he was stronger, more determined. His hands were everywhere, tearing at my clothes while I fought with everything I had.

"Please," I gasped, trying to reason with whatever humanity might be left in him. "Think about what you're doing."

"I am thinking," he panted, pushing me down onto the bed. "I'm thinking about Dominic's face when he watches his perfect life crumble."

I clawed at his face, leaving angry red marks, but he pinned my arms above my head with one hand while the other worked at his belt.

"Hold still, and this will be over quickly," he whispered against my ear, his breath hot and revolting.

That's when I heard it - a sound that cut through my terror like a lifeline.

CRASH.

Chapter 367: The Red Rose Trap

Dominic's POV

The poker game at Jude's penthouse was Xavier's suggestion—a way to lift Jude's spirits after Nora had fled the city following a territory dispute. I only showed up because Jude had stood by me through countless family wars, and loyalty demanded I return the favor. But my mind was elsewhere, consumed by thoughts of returning to Gemma and the fortress we called home.

As cards were dealt around the mahogany table, I found myself unable to concentrate on the game. Something gnawed at my instincts, that sixth sense every made man develops to survive in our world. Vincenzo's persistent calls weren't helping my already frayed nerves. I let the first few ring through to voicemail, but when another call came, concern overrode annoyance. In our business, family emergencies could mean life or death.

"What is it, Vincenzo?" My voice carried the edge that made soldiers in our organization step carefully.

"Well hello to you too, uncle. I'm doing fantastic, thanks for your concern. How about you?" His sarcasm was thick whenever I answered him with the tone reserved for insubordinate foot soldiers.

"Cut the bullshit, kid. You sound healthy enough to me," I shot back, already questioning why I'd answered.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just wondering about something that's been eating at me."

I pressed my fingers against my temple, feeling a headache building. "Vincenzo, learn to get to the fucking point instead of wasting my time with your roundabout approach."

"Alright, alright. I just got off the phone with Aunt Gemma, and I'm confused—since when do you plan romantic gestures for her without involving the whole family network?"

His words made no sense in the context of our organized world. "Vincenzo, I have no clue what the hell you're talking about."

"Seriously, uncle? Are you suffering from brain damage or something?"

"Watch your goddamn mouth, kid!"

"I called Aunt Gemma to invite her to that new place downtown for dinner—" I cut him off before he could launch into one of his meandering family stories.

"Vincenzo, enough with the background bullshit. What's your point?"

"Aunt Gemma told me she was meeting you tonight. Said you'd arranged some surprise and even sent her a single red rose with a handwritten card..."

Ice flooded my veins. In our world, red roses meant blood loyalty—or blood vengeance. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Christ, uncle, wake up!" Vincenzo's voice turned urgent, the playful nephew disappearing as family alarm bells started ringing. "I called Aunt Gemma recently. She received a red rose with a card claiming to be from you, telling her to meet you at some hotel for a surprise. I thought it was strange because you always involve our security network when planning anything for her."

"Did she specify which hotel?" My heart hammered against my ribs like a prisoner trying to break free.

"No! Wait—it wasn't you who sent that rose, was it?" Real fear crept into his voice now.

"No, it wasn't. I need to locate Gemma immediately. I'll contact you later."

I terminated the call, my hands trembling with a rage that could level buildings. Looking up, I realized my associates were already studying me with the sharp attention that kept them alive in our dangerous world. I immediately speed-dialed Gemma's assigned bodyguard.

"Hunter, report your location," I commanded.

"At your residence, sir. Miss Gemma dismissed our detail after we escorted her to the hotel. She insisted you were waiting inside for her."

"Son of a bitch!" My fist connected with the poker table, sending chips scattering like shrapnel. "Which hotel, Hunter?"

"The Ambassador, sir. I'm already en route back to that location," Hunter replied, finally grasping the deadly implications.

"Did she mention a room number?"

"Negative, sir."

I ended the call and headed for the exit, but Daniel intercepted my path with the instincts of a man who'd seen too many crime scenes.

"We're backing your play, but we need intel on what we're walking into," he said, his detective training and family connections kicking into high gear.

"Gemma received a rose and note supposedly from me, directing her to meet at the Ambassador for some surprise."

"Let's move. I'll radio for backup units."

I rode shotgun while Daniel drove through the city streets like a man racing death itself, his police contacts clearing our path.

"Daniel, we need speed, but I'd prefer to arrive breathing," I muttered, gripping the door handle as we took another corner at dangerous velocity.

"Relax. We're running code red now." He activated a switch, and suddenly sirens wailed from his unmarked vehicle, traffic parting before us like civilians fleeing a mob war.

When we finally screamed to a halt outside the hotel entrance, I felt my soul return from whatever hell it had been visiting. I silently thanked whatever saints protected our family and prayed we'd reach Gemma before it was too late. We stormed the reception desk, and before the clerk could recite hotel privacy policies, Daniel flashed his badge with the authority of someone who owned half the precinct.

Fifteenth floor. The elevator crawled upward, stopping at what felt like every floor as if the building itself was mocking our desperation. When we finally reached our destination, we spotted the door at the corridor's end. Daniel didn't hesitate—he kicked it open with the force of a man who'd breached countless doors, his service weapon already drawn.

The scene inside turned my blood to liquid nitrogen. Marcus—my exiled father—was pinning Gemma down as she fought with desperate fury to break free from his grip. Daniel grabbed the bastard by his collar and yanked him away, striking him in the skull with the butt of his gun.

"Stay on the ground where scum like you belongs," Daniel snarled with the venom reserved for the lowest forms of life.

I rushed to Gemma, gathering her shaking form in my arms. She collapsed against me, sobbing with the kind of raw terror that would haunt my nightmares forever. I lifted her up and carried her out while uniformed officers flooded in to arrest the piece of shit who shared my bloodline.

Xavier, Caleb, Jude, and Finn waited in the hallway like an honor guard. We descended to the lobby just as Hunter entered, guilt and failure written across his face. Without acknowledging anyone else, I carried Gemma to the car and climbed in, cradling her against my chest like she was made of precious glass.

Only when we were safely inside our armored vehicle did I ask, "Do you need medical attention?"

She shook her head against my neck, her tears soaking through my shirt.

"Dominic, forgive me. I believed it was you," she whispered, her voice shattered like broken crystal.

"Little bird, you should forgive me for not protecting you better." I pressed my lips to her forehead with infinite tenderness.

"How did you know to come?"

"Vincenzo called with concerns, so I contacted your security detail." I turned to address the driver. "Hunter, take us home to the compound."

Back at our fortified residence, I helped Gemma shower and settled her into our bed. Our housekeeper Maia prepared calming tea while I called Taylor, requesting he examine her immediately. He arrived quickly with my mother trailing behind. Soon after, Nadia and her household appeared, followed by our inner circle and even Brenda and Phoebe. Everyone wanted to help, to stand guard over family.

It would be a long night of vigilance, but she wouldn't face it alone. In our world, family meant everything—and no one threatened family without paying in blood.

Chapter 368: After the Storm

Dominic's POV

After Taylor finished examining Gemma, he prescribed some medication to help calm her nerves. According to him, she would sleep until the following morning. I left the bedroom door slightly open with our most trusted bodyguard Amber positioned at the foot of the bed to keep watch over her, then headed downstairs to brief the family on her condition.

"How is she, son?" My mother rushed to meet me, worry carved deep into her weathered face. Even after decades in this life, she still carried herself with the grace of a mafia queen, but her maternal instincts always surfaced when family was threatened.

"Very shaken up, Mom. Andrew gave her something strong and she's out cold. He said she'll sleep until tomorrow," I explained as she gently cupped my face with her palm, searching my eyes with the practiced concern of someone who had seen too many battles.

"And how are you holding up?" Her gaze scrutinized my face, reading the storm brewing beneath the surface like only a don's wife could.

"I'm a fucking mess of feelings right now, and none of them are good," I admitted truthfully. Exhaustion weighed on me like lead, but beneath it burned a murderous rage toward Marcus that I could barely keep leashed. The old bastard had crossed a line that demanded blood payment.

"Take it easy, man. That piece of garbage is locked up in the family's private holding and won't be seeing freedom again," Daniel reassured me, his hand gripping my shoulder with the solidarity of someone who had helped me bury bodies before.

"Thanks, Daniel. If it weren't for your insane fucking driving, I might not have made it in time to stop that animal," I expressed my gratitude for his reckless speed through the city streets that, for once, had been exactly what we desperately needed.

"No need to thank me," he replied with a grim smile. "But I need to ask, did she tell you exactly what went down in there?"

I dropped into the leather armchair before responding, my hands still trembling slightly from the adrenaline crash. "She said he locked her in the safe room and tried to grab her. When she fought back and shoved him away, he threw her onto the bed. He was about to force himself on her when we kicked down the door."

"Thank Christ we got there when we did," Daniel exhaled deeply, his relief mixing with the barely contained violence that lived in all of us when family was threatened.

He then took charge of briefing the rest of the crew, answering questions and clearing up any confusion about the events that had unfolded. The living room buzzed with the low murmur of seasoned soldiers discussing security protocols and revenge plans.

"By the way, Vincenzo, how did you realize something was off?" Daniel asked, turning his attention to my sharp-eyed nephew who had proven himself worthy of the family name today.

Vincenzo shifted uncomfortably, lowering his head. "I thought it was weird that Uncle Dominic didn't ask for backup with his surprise plan. I got suspicious and wanted to know what he was really up to. I was hoping he'd let me in on whatever scheme he was running."

"Vincenzo, you might want to consider a future in our intelligence division. Those instincts of yours could save lives," Daniel complimented him, and I felt a surge of pride for the kid.

Carmen rolled her eyes dramatically from her perch on the sofa. "Oh please, Inspector Gadget. My brother is the biggest loudmouth in the family. No covert operation would stay secret because he'd spill everything to anyone who'd listen. He should run the gossip network instead." Her comment drew genuine laughter from the assembled family members, lightening the oppressive mood that had settled over us.

I smiled at my nephew, whose eyes still carried the weight of what we'd discovered today. "Vincenzo, we found her in time because you trusted your gut. The family owes you one."

"Jesus, uncle, I still can't believe that monster shares our blood," Vincenzo struggled to hold back tears, and I understood his revulsion all too well. Having a traitor in the bloodline was the worst kind of betrayal in our world.

"Don't think about that poison anymore, sweetheart," my mother comforted him, her weathered hands stroking his hair with the same gentleness she'd shown me after an early kill.

Phoebe approached with the careful composure of someone raised in this life. "Dominic, my father wanted me to tell you he's already reached out to my uncle in the state attorney's office. They're going to make Marcus's remaining time very unpleasant. He also said the family's resources are at your complete disposal."

"Tell him I appreciate the backup, Phoebe. It's good to have allies in high places," I replied, feeling the adrenaline finally draining from my system and leaving me bone-deep exhausted.

Maia entered the living room to announce she'd prepared a full spread for everyone. We gathered in the formal dining room, eating while keeping the conversation light. Everyone worked to lift the mood and coax something resembling peace from me. I was surrounded by the most dangerous and loyal people in the city, and I needed to focus on that strength instead of dwelling on Marcus's existence.

"Dominic, you should go upstairs and rest with Gemma," Zoe declared with her usual authority, already orchestrating everyone's departure like the tactical genius she was. "We're all heading out now. Tomorrow, when Gemma's feeling stronger, give us a call and we'll come check on her."

"Uncle, can I stay the night?" Vincenzo asked hopefully, his young face still processing the day's violence.

Carmen quickly added, "Me too, uncle. We can help cheer up Aunt Gemma in the morning, you know."

"Of course you can stay. She'll love seeing your faces at breakfast," I smiled, knowing it was absolutely true. "But only if your old man signs off on it."

Gerard playfully nudged his children toward me with mock exasperation. "They're all yours, Dominic. Hell, I'll even draw up custody papers if you want them permanently."

"As if you could survive a day without us," Vincenzo shot back at his father with the cocky grin that ran in our bloodline, finally bringing a genuine smile to my face since this nightmare had begun.

Chapter 369: Surrounded by Love

Gemma's POV

Darkness enveloped me as consciousness slowly returned. The silence felt strange considering how rested I felt, as if I'd been sleeping for hours under heavy sedation. Part of me wanted to stay buried in sleep for days, hoping to wake and find that yesterday's nightmare had been nothing more than a fevered dream. But the brutal reality remained – Marcus's vicious assault had actually happened.

Every time I closed my eyes, I could still feel that monster's disgusting hands on my skin. The terror that had clenched around my throat when Dominic's banished father attacked me in that abandoned warehouse hadn't completely faded. Though I tried not to dwell on the details, I knew exactly what would have happened if Dominic hadn't tracked me down when he did. I had no idea how he'd found Marcus's hideout or how he'd known to look there, but he'd arrived just in time to prevent the unthinkable – my capo had saved me from his own flesh and blood.

I curled deeper into the silk sheets, noticing the empty space where Dominic should have been. Pulling his pillow against my chest, I inhaled his familiar scent of expensive cologne and gunpowder. Where was he? After witnessing his father's sick attempt to violate me, had Dominic decided he couldn't stand to look at me anymore? Even though Marcus hadn't succeeded in his assault, was the mere thought of what almost happened too much for Dominic's possessive nature to handle?

A crushing wave of despair rolled over me, powerful and suffocating. The trauma of being overpowered and nearly destroyed left me nauseous and barely holding on. The thought that Dominic might abandon me now was a pain beyond what I could endure. Why wasn't he here when I needed his protection

most? I craved his iron embrace, his deadly reassurance. Even Amber was missing from his usual spot at the foot of the bed. The feeling of abandonment was crushing my already fractured spirit.

Tears streamed down my face unchecked. My entire being ached – body, soul, and mind consumed by the aftermath of violence. Suddenly, a small warm hand touched my cheek with surprising gentleness. I slowly opened my swollen eyes to find the master bedroom now flooded with morning light. Four pairs of worried eyes were studying me with obvious concern. Without hesitation, I opened my arms wide.

"I need hugs right now!" I declared desperately, immediately finding myself wrapped in a protective bundle of loving arms.

"Songbird, why are you crying?" Dominic asked softly, positioning himself behind me like a human shield and enveloping me in his muscular embrace.

"Because I thought you'd left me after what your father tried to do," I sniffled as Carmen's tiny hand gently brushed my tears away with the care of a little nurse.

"My mom says crying gives you premature wrinkles and makes you look weak in front of enemies," Carmen stated with such deadly seriousness that I couldn't help but laugh softly despite everything.

"I'm so grateful you're all here with me!" I pulled Carmen and Vincenzo closer, feeling Amber's cold nose nudging my bare foot. "You too, Amber." The massive guard dog settled down protectively, resting his heavy head across my feet like a furry fortress.

"Listen carefully, because I'll say this every day for the rest of our lives: I will never abandon you," Dominic promised fiercely, pressing a possessive kiss against my neck. "And neither will these two little soldiers – they're officially under our protection now."

"Are you being serious?" I asked, wondering if this was just comfort talk.

"Completely serious. Gerard gave his word," Dominic chuckled darkly, and Vincenzo responded with an approving click of his tongue.

"As if they could survive without us anyway," Vincenzo declared with cocky confidence.

"Now they can manage. They have Caviar and Popcorn keeping them entertained," Carmen confirmed smugly. "Port't you noticed mom secretly feeds them gourmet treats and dad plays tactical games with them in the fortified garden?"

"That sneaky deceiver!" Vincenzo exclaimed, looking genuinely betrayed by this revelation.

"Deceiver? Is that your vocabulary word for this week?" Carmen turned to her brother with sharp curiosity.

"Yes it is! Pretty sophisticated, right?" Vincenzo seemed pleased with his linguistic choice.

"Mine is still superior," Carmen replied dismissively, like a tiny queen addressing a peasant.

"You always claim that," Vincenzo protested with brotherly frustration.

"And I'm consistently correct in my assessment," Carmen responded with the unshakeable confidence of a future mafia princess.

"Wait, what's this vocabulary competition about exactly?" I asked, genuinely intrigued by their sibling rivalry.

"My mom forces us to master a new word every week, and we have to demonstrate proper usage regularly. We research unfamiliar words in the dictionary and practice incorporating them into conversation all week," Vincenzo explained with the patience of someone who'd given this explanation before.

"And you do this intellectual labor without receiving any compensation?" Dominic teased, raising one dark eyebrow skeptically.

"Uncle, naturally we receive compensation – the immense pleasure of expanding our verbal arsenal," Carmen explained with an air of sophisticated maturity.

"You think I'm falling for that act, you little mercenary?" Dominic poked Carmen playfully in the ribs, making me laugh despite my emotional state.

"Mom provides fifty dollars to whoever learns and properly uses the assigned word," Vincenzo confessed, unable to maintain the pretense any longer.

"Blabbermouth traitor!" Carmen complained indignantly. "And Dad gives another fifty to whoever tackles the most challenging word. And I consistently emerge victorious." Her smile blazed with triumphant pride.

"'Consistently' is a bold claim, squirt. You win frequently, but only because Dad shows obvious favoritism toward his little princess," Vincenzo grumbled with obvious jealousy.

"And what's your word this week, Carmen?" I asked with genuine curiosity, feeling my spirits lifting significantly.

"My word, aunt, will ensure that I receive the ultimate requital for my intellectual victory with tremendous satisfaction this week," Carmen announced regally, sitting cross-legged on the bed with a look of absolute triumph directed at her defeated brother.

"Damn! The mini blackmailer conquered again!" Vincenzo looked utterly devastated, triggering genuine laughter from all of us gathered on the bed.

"I didn't even recognize that word, Vincenzo," I said consolingly. "What does 'requital' actually mean?"

"It means reward, recompense, recognition, retribution, or compensation," Carmen rattled off with obvious delight at her intellectual superiority.

"I'll have to ask Nadia for some parenting strategies; she has some brilliant child-rearing techniques," I commented thoughtfully.

"Already planning to torture our little cousin with vocabulary drills," Vincenzo complained dramatically.

"Sleepyhead, how about joining us for breakfast by the secured pool?" Dominic suggested tenderly, giving me a gentle kiss on my temple.

"The room was so dark I assumed it was still nighttime. What time is it exactly?" I asked, my mind finally clearing from the medication fog.

"It’s late morning," Vincenzo informed me efficiently. "You need to hurry, because my little cousin and I are absolutely starving." He hopped off the bed energetically, making me realize I was famished too.

"Wow, I completely overslept," I said, surprised by how late I’d slept.

"Take your time recovering, Songbird. Andrew gave you some serious sedatives yesterday to help you process the trauma, that’s why you slept so deeply," Dominic explained gently, kissing my cheek and helping me stand on unsteady legs. Vincenzo, Carmen, and Amber were already heading toward the reinforced door.

"Are we really going to keep them under our protection?" I looked at Dominic with hopeful eyes.

"Even if I have to force Gerard to honor his promise at gunpoint," he replied with dark humor. We shared a knowing laugh, but deep down, I truly cherished having those two fearless children around as our family.

Chapter 370: Shattered Peace

Gemma’s POV

The steaming hot shower had worked miracles on both my body and spirit. By the time I joined everyone at the breakfast table in Dominic’s fortified penthouse, my stomach was growling with hunger, eager to make up for the hellish night I had endured. We gathered around the massive mahogany table, laughing and chatting about mundane family matters while Vincenzo not-so-subtly slipped pieces of bacon to Amber beneath the table, pretending we couldn’t see his covert feeding operation.

After the brutal interrogation and near-execution I had survived just hours before, being surrounded by these three incredible people who were doing everything in their power to make me smile felt like the most potent medicine. Their fierce loyalty and protective affection were exactly what I needed to recover from my brush with death.

"Gemma, what would you say to having lunch at the club today? Just the four of us?" Dominic suggested, his emerald eyes bright with genuine enthusiasm.

"The Social Union?" I asked, considering the proposal carefully.

Dominic shook his head firmly. "No, the Thorne Sports Complex. Their restaurant is exceptional, and they have this stunning integrated natural preserve. I think you would find it peaceful."

"That sounds absolutely perfect," I agreed, warming to the idea immediately. "Let’s do it."

The kids seemed equally thrilled about this change in our usual routine. The Thorne Sports Complex was truly a breathtaking facility—sprawling manicured grounds seamlessly blending with untouched wilderness. It offered countless athletic facilities, recreational activities, a luxury spa, an upscale restaurant, and an intimate café, all heavily secured by family personnel disguised as staff.

The restaurant proved to be every bit as spectacular as Dominic had promised. Surrounded by lush vegetation and positioned beside a small natural waterfall that cascaded down a stone wall, creating the most soothing ambient soundtrack imaginable. We selected a private outdoor table to fully immerse ourselves in the stunning natural surroundings, with Dominic’s security detail maintaining discrete watch positions.

"Still not tired of this little troublemaker, sweetheart? You even brought your precious nephews to dine with her."

I recognized that venomous voice immediately and felt my good mood evaporate like smoke. Beatrix. How did this psychotic woman manage to track us down here? I exhaled sharply in pure frustration.

Dominic’s handsome features hardened into the cold mask I knew meant someone was about to suffer. "Watch how you address my fiancée, Beatrix. I am not in the mood for your pathetic games today."

"When will you finally understand that she is completely wrong for you?" Beatrix pressed forward, her calculating eyes filled with malicious intent as she glared at me.

I could not restrain myself any longer. "Oh, really? And who exactly is right for him? You?"

"Yes, me!" Beatrix declared with completely unearned confidence. "Get it through your thick skull, you little troublemaker. You are nothing but a temporary distraction. He will end up with me, even if I have to eliminate you permanently." She seemed to have conveniently forgotten about the thorough beating I had administered to her previously.

"Auntie, please calm yourself! Getting this agitated is not good for the baby," Vincenzo intervened swiftly, rising from his chair to position himself protectively between Beatrix and me. Even with him blocking my direct line of sight, I could still see Beatrix’s face transform with complete shock.

"Baby? This troublemaker is carrying a child? That is absolutely impossible! Dominic?" Her voice wavered between utter disbelief and genuine distress. It was the first time I had ever heard her use my fiancé’s actual name instead of one of her nauseating pet endearments.

"Well, Beatrix," Dominic said with ice-cold composure, "did you not know? I am going to be a father, and I could not be more thrilled about it. And just so we are crystal clear—I am marrying Gemma very soon. Now, do yourself a tremendous favor and forget I ever existed. Leave us in peace."

"Marriage? Dear God!" Beatrix’s voice rose a full octave. "Cannot you see what is happening here? She is trapping you with a pregnancy! She is nothing but a calculating gold digger!"

I shot to my feet, white-hot fury coursing through my veins. "Listen here, you miserable creature. I am nothing like you and your pathetic circle of friends who fabricate elaborate lies to ensnare men. If I were you, I would stay very far away from me, because the next time I catch you anywhere near my family, I will turn your face completely inside out."

"Stay away from me, you absolutely insane woman." Beatrix took several steps backward.

"What, running away now? You spineless coward! Do not have the courage to face me directly?" I advanced toward her with predatory intent.

Something dangerous shifted in Beatrix's expression. She suddenly lunged toward me, reaching out as if attempting to make physical contact. Before she could lay a single finger on me, Dominic stepped between us with lightning speed.

"Are you seriously considering attacking a pregnant woman, Beatrix?" Dominic's voice boomed across the restaurant, as he kept me safely positioned behind his imposing frame.

"But, sweetheart..." Beatrix whined pathetically, making me want to rip her lying tongue straight from her mouth.

"No excuses, Beatrix! Enough! This has become beyond tiresome and stressful. It has gone far too far. Stay away from us, stop stalking me like some deranged predator, and most importantly—do not come anywhere near Gemma." Dominic's tone carried an unmistakable lethal threat that made even the nearby security personnel tense.

Thorne family security arrived within moments. Dominic calmly informed them that Beatrix had attempted to physically assault me, resulting in her immediate and permanent removal from the premises. We were finally able to return to our lunch in blessed peace.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon enjoying the complex's numerous amenities. The cheerful atmosphere, filled with other family members and surrounded by natural beauty, was exactly what we needed to decompress. As we headed toward the parking garage, joking and playfully teasing one another, I noticed Dominic's expression suddenly transform into one of absolute horror.

"What is wrong, handsome?" I asked, completely confused by his reaction.

"My car!" Dominic spoke slowly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Following his shocked gaze, I finally understood his horror completely. The bulletproof sedan was totally vandalized—deep scratches marred the armored paint, the reinforced windshield and passenger

window were completely shattered, the hood was severely dented, and the front bumper hung precariously, nearly scraping the concrete floor.

"What the hell happened here?" Dominic was absolutely livid, scanning the secure area for witnesses but finding none. "We need to speak with facility management immediately. How does my vehicle get destroyed in the family's private parking garage without anyone noticing or informing me?"

"Do you have any doubt whatsoever about who orchestrated this?" I asked, completely certain that Beatrix was behind this destructive revenge.

The dangerous gleam in Dominic's emerald eyes told me he agreed completely with my assessment. Without another word, he turned and strode back toward the complex administration offices, lethal fury radiating from every powerful step.