Mafia Mask 371

Chapter 371: Dangerous Revelation

Gemma's POV

As the weeks passed, the memory of Marcus's brutal assault gradually retreated to the shadows of my mind. The horrific attack became another buried scar in my collection of traumas, and the nightmares that had tormented my sleep finally began to fade.

Nick's sudden disappearance from the streets should have brought me relief. Instead, his absence only amplified my unease. I understood enough about street predators to know that when they vanished, they were usually plotting their next move from the shadows. Nancy's persistent appearances near Caleb's legitimate businesses served as constant reminders that Nick remained a deadly threat lurking in my world.

Adding fuel to my mounting concerns, Beatrix had appointed herself as my personal tormentor. The spoiled mafia princess created chaos wherever our paths crossed. According to Zoe, despite Dominic's explicit orders banning her from all Thorne family territories, Beatrix continued her relentless campaign, stationing herself outside our establishments like some deranged sentinel, determined to reclaim what she believed belonged to her.

While neither Beatrix nor Nancy truly terrified me anymore, Nick's invisible presence continued to poison my thoughts. Still, I refused to let fear control my existence. I was determined to maintain whatever normalcy remained possible in my dangerous new reality.

One afternoon, an overwhelming craving for meat pies consumed me. The intensity caught me off guard, but I decided to embrace it. I called Lila and suggested meeting at the small Italian café near Caleb's corporate front for coffee. She enthusiastically agreed to join me.

After claiming our usual corner table, I proceeded to order four different varieties of meat pies, earning a bewildered stare from Lila. The portions weren't exactly modest, but my cravings demanded diversity. We were laughing together, discussing Erica and Audrey's animated plans for organizing my bachelorette party scheduled for the following Saturday, when an unwelcome interruption shattered our peaceful moment.

"Bachelorette party? How pathetically common!" Beatrix's venomous voice cut through our conversation as she materialized beside our table. "Don't waste precious time planning something that will never see daylight. You need to face reality and accept that you'll never become Mrs. Frost. Dominic belongs to me, always has. Not even that decrepit whore Nancy managed to steal him permanently."

"Speaking of whores, did someone mention my name?" Nancy's voice dripped with malice as she appeared behind Beatrix like a vengeful specter.

"Perfect timing! Finally crawled out from whatever rock you've been hiding under, you ancient relic?" Beatrix spun to confront Nancy, her face twisted with disgust. I settled back in my chair, realizing this confrontation might actually prove entertaining.

"Watch that sharp tongue of yours, little girl, or you might find yourself permanently silenced," Nancy threatened, stepping dangerously close to Beatrix.

Beatrix released a cold, calculating laugh. "You overestimate your importance in this world, corpse!"

Their venomous exchange suggested a shared history of mutual hatred, with each woman possessing intimate knowledge of the other's weaknesses and triggers.

"Listen carefully, Dumb-bella. I don't think I matter, I know I do. I was Dominic's legitimate girlfriend while you were just his convenient plaything," Nancy taunted with surgical precision.

Beatrix's face flushed crimson with rage. "At least I never traded him away for his own father! And for your information, all these years he found endless pleasure in my body while you were rotting away in whatever hellhole you disappeared to."

"You were merely a temporary distraction, Isa-fool! Just like this other pathetic creature here." Nancy gestured dismissively toward me with theatrical contempt. "MY Dominic was simply killing time with you two insignificant wenches. Now that I've returned, he'll soon be feeding from my palm like the obedient dog he truly is." She extended her palm mockingly and tapped it with her index finger.

"You’re completely delusional, Denture Margaret. Dominic is mine! Neither you nor this fraudulent pregnant woman will succeed in stealing him from me." Beatrix’s voice escalated dangerously, drawing unwanted attention from nearby patrons who weren’t already captivated by the public spectacle.

"We finally agree on something, Isa-fool. This nobody doesn’t possess even the slightest chance with Dominic," Nancy cackled, her face contorting with such twisted satisfaction that she momentarily resembled a demon emerging from hell. Suddenly, her predatory smile vanished completely. "Wait, did you just say pregnant? This worthless creature is carrying a child?"

"Wow, your brain works slower than expected, Diaper-Changing Margaret," Beatrix mocked ruthlessly. "Yes, this shameless gold digger decided to employ the oldest manipulation tactic in existence. She got herself knocked up by Dominic and now they’re supposedly engaged. But I’m already implementing plans to ensure that fairy tale never reaches its conclusion."

An icy chill coursed through my entire body. The absolute last thing I needed was for Nick to discover my pregnancy through these vindictive women’s loose tongues. That knowledge would only intensify his dangerous obsession and potentially endanger both me and my innocent unborn child. What had begun as an amusing public confrontation had rapidly transformed into a legitimate threat when Beatrix’s reckless mouth revealed my most vulnerable secret. I needed to evacuate this situation immediately.

I subtly signaled Hunter, who instantly positioned his imposing frame between the feuding women and our table like a human fortress.

"I’m going to politely request that you both step away from this area," Hunter stated firmly, his protective stance radiating barely contained violence.

"This establishment serves the public, you oversized caveman," Beatrix protested with false bravado.

"You really don’t want to discover what I’m capable of doing to either of you, miss." For the first time since knowing him, Hunter’s presence felt genuinely terrifying even to me.

"Lay one finger on me and I’ll scream bloody murder," Nancy threatened desperately.

"Please do exactly that. It'll give me legitimate reason to become significantly more irritated than I currently am. Now step away." Hunter advanced toward them menacingly while simultaneously signaling our waitress, who quickly wrapped my remaining food and processed our payment with practiced efficiency.

I stood with Lila beside me, and we exited the café with Hunter maintaining close protective formation behind us. Only when we safely entered Caleb's heavily secured office building did my racing heart finally begin to slow, though my mind continued spinning with terrifying concerns about Nick's potential reaction to news of my pregnancy.

"Miss Gemma," Hunter's authoritative voice interrupted my spiraling thoughts. "I'm required to report this incident directly to Mr. Dominic. Would you prefer to speak with him first?"

"Yes, Hunter. Please give me some time to explain the situation to him personally." I released a shaky breath that seemed to burn my throat, my entire body trembling with genuine fear.

"Gemma, maybe you should consider taking extended leave from work," Lila suggested gently, her eyes reflecting deep concern. "When Nick discovers you're pregnant, he's going to escalate this situation beyond anything we've seen before." She had perfectly articulated my exact terror.

"Lila, I refuse to abandon my position. I'm completely safe within these walls. I believe it's wiser if I simply avoid leaving this building until this entire nightmare reaches its resolution." I remained steadfast in maintaining my professional responsibilities despite the mounting dangers.

"Alright. But I'm genuinely worried about you. I'm going to inform Daniel about this incident immediately." Lila mentioned her boyfriend with a heavy, troubled sigh.

"Still experiencing difficulties with him?" I asked, studying her conflicted expression carefully.

"Still," she replied simply, her voice heavy with unresolved pain. "But I'll find a way to work through it eventually."

Chapter 372: Threats and Lies

Gemma's POV

Calming Dominic down after recounting the restaurant incident proved nearly impossible. The moment I finished explaining what happened, my Capo husband immediately demanded I quit working at the family's legitimate front company. I spent considerable time convincing him that the Thorne family's corporate headquarters remained completely secure.

I knew he would abandon his own territory management duties to rush to my office—something that had been occurring with disturbing frequency lately. Fortunately, the evening shift was nearly over, so his absence from overseeing the money laundering operations wouldn't create additional problems.

Dominic arrived in record time, shortly after my call. He leaned menacingly across my desk, his emerald eyes blazing with the kind of fury I'd seen him reserve for family traitors.

"Gemma, I was already uncomfortable having my wife exposed to street-level dangers while working. Now that you're carrying the next generation of our bloodline, I despise this arrangement even more. We need to reconsider your position here," he declared, planting both palms firmly on my desk like he was claiming territory.

"And what's your alternative? Lock me away in our penthouse like some mafia princess?" I asked, maintaining my composure despite his intimidating presence. "Because that's absolutely not happening."

"Gemma!" Dominic collapsed into the chair opposite me, running his hands through his golden hair in complete exasperation. "I cannot tolerate the thought of anything happening to you or our heir."

"Neither can I, Dominic. But you must understand—I'm completely protected here. I've already decided I won't leave the building during business hours. I'll remain inside and have meals delivered through our security network, but I refuse to quit." I made it crystal clear this wasn't open for negotiation.

"You swear on your life you'll stick to that protocol?" His tone shifted to something approaching desperation.

"I swear it," I assured him, hoping to ease the anxiety that came with loving someone in our violent world.

My phone interrupted our tense conversation. I immediately recognized the number and felt my blood run cold. Nancy had obviously wasted no time spreading the news through the underground networks. I placed the phone on my desk and answered on speaker, knowing Dominic needed to hear this threat firsthand.

"Little Gemma, you never learn your place, do you?" Nick's menacing voice filled the room with its familiar venom.

"What will it take for you to disappear from my life permanently, Nick?" I asked, letting my exhaustion show through my voice.

"I want you, little Gemma. Port't you figured that out by now?" he responded with condescending arrogance. "But word on the street is you've been very busy. Pregnant, little Gemma? Seriously, carrying that rich mafia boy's bastard spawn?"

"Don't you dare call my child a bastard," I snapped back with ice in my voice.

"But that's exactly what the kid is, little Gemma. A worthless little bastard—because your marriage to that spoiled mob prince means nothing!" Nick declared with absolute authority. I watched dangerous anger flash across Dominic's handsome features as his jaw clenched.

"That's what you think. Just forget I exist, Nick," I said firmly, which only made him release his signature cold laugh.

"Little Gemma, get this through your pretty little skull. You belong to me, only to me, and you will be with me eventually," Nick spoke with the chilling calmness of someone who'd killed before. "If you refuse to be with me, little Gemma, you won't be with anyone—because I'll put a bullet in your head myself!"

"You're completely insane!" My throat tightened as the words came out. "Forget I exist, Nick. I don't belong to you. You have zero claim over me. Just disappear."

"You want to test my resolve? Fine, I'll give you a little surprise to remember," he threatened with deadly promise. "But to show you how generous I can be, I won't harm the little bastard. I'll raise him right alongside the children you'll give me after your husband dies."

"You're completely deranged! Don't you dare come anywhere near me, Nick." I ended the call before my rising panic could make me say something that might provoke him further, or before Dominic could speak and potentially escalate Nick's rage to murderous levels.

"Gemma, this situation is becoming genuinely dangerous. Let's leave the territory for a while, please. I want you to have a peaceful pregnancy, and our child to enter this world without death threats hanging over us," Dominic pleaded, but he was asking me to abandon everything.

"Dominic, I could do that, but what happens when he targets someone I love for revenge? My mother and Lila are already on his radar through street connections. I cannot leave them vulnerable to that psychopath," I reasoned logically. I could see Dominic processing my argument through his strategic mind.

"Damn it! You're absolutely right. But the situation is escalating toward bloodshed. I'm terrified of what that maniac might attempt, Gemma."

"I know, my love. I'm scared too. But we need to think like family soldiers now. For the immediate future, I'll stay inside headquarters during all work hours. Our security detail shadows my every move. And our private residence has military-grade protection."

"Fine, we'll try your approach. But if this gets any worse, I'm taking you to our overseas safe houses, even if I have to carry you there against your will."

"Agreed. If violence escalates, I'll go wherever our family's protection extends," I conceded, hoping to calm his nerves, though Dominic remained visibly on edge like a predator sensing danger.

"Alright. I'll update Daniel about this phone call and confirm whether they've successfully activated the wire surveillance," Dominic sighed heavily.

"Honey, is our detective having problems at the precinct?" I asked as casually as possible, hoping to help Lila uncover the truth.

"Just the usual corruption politics, I assume. Why do you ask?" Dominic was distracted, scrolling through his encrypted contacts for Daniel's number.

"Nothing specific. He just seemed more stressed than usual that day at the hospital. Do you know if something particular is bothering him?" I continued my innocent act, but Dominic looked up with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

"What exactly are you fishing for information about, Gemma?" he asked, studying me with the calculating gaze of a seasoned Capo.

"Oh, honey, didn't that phone call he received seem strange to you? He became really upset and tense," I maintained my act, but Dominic wasn't buying my performance.

"My goddess, he was anxious, nervous, and stressed about what happened to Lila. She was injured, and Daniel was furious—you know how our people protect their own," he offered this weak explanation, confirming my suspicion that he knew much more than he was revealing.

"Yeah, you're probably right." I decided against sharing Lila's growing suspicions about Daniel's true loyalties. Dominic would immediately alert the detective while distancing himself from any potential complications. So I pretended to accept his story completely.

"Are you almost finished with work here?" Dominic smiled, considering the matter successfully closed.

"Yes, just need to review this financial report and we can leave together."

"Perfect. I'll head to the executive break room for coffee and call Daniel." Damn, I was certain he would warn Daniel about my probing questions. I needed to make Dominic forget about the entire conversation.

"Oh no, you won't. Stay right here with me," I employed my sweetest, most irresistible tone—the one that could make my dangerous husband do anything I wanted. At least I could buy Lila some precious time. "Call him from right here. I'll have someone bring you coffee."

Chapter 373: Federal Reality Check

Marcus's POV

I've been trying to figure out how that incompetent son of mine Dominic managed to track us to that warehouse. When Gemma walked through those doors, I was certain she believed she was meeting him for some romantic reconciliation. Her presence confirmed she hadn't spoken with that fool about my real intentions. Yet somehow, he discovered my plan and demolished everything I'd carefully arranged to reclaim my standing in the Thorne family.

What made matters worse was his arrival with that savage enforcer Isaac who immediately began beating me senseless. That muscle-bound thug had fists like sledgehammers; my ribs still ached from where he pummeled me against the concrete wall.

All I wanted was one night to break that defiant woman who dared to steal my son's loyalty from the family bloodline. I had no intention of sharing my prize with that street rat Nick. Yes, I made an agreement with him to coordinate our revenge against Dominic's woman, but I grew impatient waiting for some lowlife gangster's permission to enjoy what should have been mine by right of family hierarchy. So I took matters into my own hands—borrowed funds from my old associates and executed my strategy. I recalled overhearing Gemma describe how Dominic used to send those pathetic anonymous gifts during their courtship—such sentimental weakness for a Capo! Nevertheless, it served my purpose perfectly as she fell for my deception. I would have claimed my victory and proven Dominic's woman could be conquered if that ungrateful son hadn't appeared with half the Thorne family's muscle and ruined everything.

Now I'm rotting in this putrid federal holding cell for an extended period, denied what should have been my rightful revenge against the family that cast me out. At least the lead detective showed some respect for my former status and contacted my attorney. Let's see how Kellen handles this mess. I've been locked up far too long—this humiliation has gone on long enough for someone of my former standing in the organization.

"Hey, you twisted old pervert, your shyster lawyer's here," called a federal marshal approaching my cell.

"Watch your mouth when addressing a former Thorne family associate, you ignorant government lackey!" I snapped, furious at yet another reference to my age and current circumstances.

"Former associate? You understand where you are and what landed you here, yet you still think anyone gives a damn about your past connections? Keep running your mouth and your reputation as a Jack will spread through the federal system faster than wildfire. Then you'll wish you were only dealing with me," the marshal warned ominously.

"Jack? What in God's name is a Jack?" I asked, genuinely bewildered. These law enforcement types and their prison informants seemed to communicate in some incomprehensible street dialect that had evolved since my time running territory for the family.

"Jack means rapist in federal prison language, you perverted old-timer," the marshal chuckled with obvious satisfaction. "Now turn around and put your hands behind your back for transport."

"I refuse to turn around. I don't take orders from government employees who wouldn't last any time on the streets I used to control," I retorted to this smart-mouthed federal agent who had been antagonizing me since my arrest at the warehouse.

"Fine, then you can forget about meeting your high-priced lawyer," he replied, visibly enjoying watching a former mafia associate grovel in federal custody.

"That's my constitutional right; you can't interfere with legal counsel," I protested, knowing full well that federal detention operated by different rules than the street justice I was accustomed to.

"But you're refusing to exit the cell according to security protocols," he pointed out with exaggerated bureaucratic precision.

"I never said I'm refusing to leave this cage," I argued, realizing I was losing this verbal sparring match.

"When you refuse standard restraint procedures, you're refusing transport. Handcuffing is mandatory federal protocol for all detainees. Your choice, former big shot," the marshal continued mocking my fallen status.

Reluctantly, I turned and positioned my hands behind my back. The government thug secured the federal restraints and yanked them violently, causing my spine to slam against the reinforced cell bars.

"Understand something, Jack," he emphasized the prison slur deliberately, "the moment you landed in federal custody, your old family connections became worthless. Without connections, you lose protection, which means we control your world now. You sick old predator!"

He hauled me roughly from the holding area to a sterile interrogation room containing only a metal table and two uncomfortable chairs bolted to the floor. Kellen waited inside, looking far more nervous than during our previous meetings when I still commanded respect through family ties. The marshal seated me without removing the federal restraints. When I demanded their removal, he laughed and informed me they'd only come off upon my return to the cell block. I fantasized about having this worthless government employee disappeared the way we used to handle disrespectful problems in the old days.

"Calm yourself and stop fixating on protocol violations, Marcus. This is standard federal procedure for organized crime defendants," Kellen stated gravely, his usual confidence clearly shaken by the severity of my current situation.

"Procedure? This is deliberate psychological warfare designed to break down former family associates," I complained, still clinging to my past identity.

"Think whatever helps you cope, but heed my advice—follow all instructions without complaint, both here and in federal prison, unless you want your remaining years to become substantially worse than they already are," Kellen cautioned with unusual bluntness.

"Federal prison, Kellen? Stop right there—I'm not going to some government cage. You better secure my release immediately and remind them who they're dealing with," I refused to consider incarceration in some deplorable federal facility far from my old territory.

"Marcus, Marcus." Kellen sighed deeply, adjusted his chair closer to the table, and leaned forward. "Let me explain your predicament with complete honesty—your situation is catastrophic! I warned you when I secured your previous release that another federal offense would make freedom virtually impossible, especially for someone with your background in organized crime."

Dominic’s POV

The weekend was approaching, and despite the treacherous week navigating family territory disputes, I couldn’t help but feel a surge of anticipation. In just days, I would be taking blood oaths at the altar, binding my life to the woman who had completely transformed my world from the shadows of the underworld. Though our mafia wedding ceremony would make it official before the family, what truly united us was something far deeper - our unbreakable bond, forged through bullets and betrayal, growing stronger with each passing day of violence we survived together.

If anyone had suggested to me some time ago that I’d be eagerly counting down to my wedding day and anticipating fatherhood while running one of the most ruthless money laundering operations on the East Coast, I would have put a bullet in their skull for the insult. Yet here I was, impatient for our blood ceremony, anxious about the future heir growing in Gemma’s womb, and rushing back to our heavily fortified compound every evening just to see her radiant smile behind bulletproof glass. I had become a man who had everything he could possibly want in this blood-soaked world, and somehow, even more than that.

"Good morning, Boss!" Zoe’s voice carried its usual steel wrapped in silk as she strode into my secured office at Zenith Systems, our family’s legitimate tech front.

"Good morning, you dangerous little viper. What’s got you so pleased with yourself?" I asked, studying her carefully. In our line of work, excessive enthusiasm usually meant someone was about to get their throat cut.

"Oh, I don’t know," she said with mock innocence, tapping her encrypted phone against her chin. "Could it be the ladies-only war council tomorrow? Or perhaps the wedding next week of the once-untamable Dominic Frost, former heartbreaker and notorious family enforcer?"

I couldn’t help but laugh at her theatrical performance. Even in the deadly serious world of organized crime, Zoe managed to inject her twisted sense of humor. "Speaking of this ladies-only gathering, what exactly are you all plotting? Gemma seems pretty excited, which terrifies me more than any rival family’s threats."

"Oh, Dominic," Zoe waved dismissively, her ring catching the light - the same ring that had once belonged to a rival family’s daughter before we eliminated their bloodline. "You know how these things

go in our world. Erica and Audrey are handling all the security arrangements and entertainment, so literally anything could happen."

My smile instantly vanished, and I felt the familiar cold dread that came with potential threats to my territory. "Wait, what? Those two psychopaths are in charge?"

"Of course!" Zoe burst into laughter that would have chilled civilian blood. "You didn't know?"

"Hell no!" I growled, feeling the rage that had made me legendary in family circles.

"They're promising it'll be the bachelorette party of the century - complete with enough firepower to level a city block!" Zoe's eyes glittered with that familiar bloodthirsty anticipation she always had when violence was imminent.

"I need to contact Nadia immediately," I muttered, retreating behind my reinforced desk while Zoe's lethal laughter echoed through the office. Predictably, my calls to our family's communications specialist went straight to an encrypted voicemail system.

Shortly afterward, my bodyguard informed me through our internal security network that Kellen Curtis was requesting an audience. This was unexpected - we had no current business dealings with his legal practice. Then I remembered his connection to that waste of flesh Marcus, and I braced myself for whatever pathetic attempt at extortion was coming.

"Good morning, Dominic. How are the family affairs?" Kellen greeted me with that calculated formality typical of lawyers who made their living dancing around organized crime without getting their hands too bloody.

"Good morning, Kellen. You're here quite early for someone not on our payroll - I assume someone's life depends on this being urgent," I replied, making no effort to hide the threat in my voice.

"Yes, Dominic, unfortunately. I take no pleasure in this visit, but as you're well aware, your biological father is currently enjoying state hospitality, and I find myself in a rather precarious financial position." He began what promised to be a lengthy sob story.

"Kellen, you have a few minutes before my patience runs out and this conversation takes a much more physical turn. Speak plainly or don't speak at all." I let my hand drift casually toward the drawer where I kept my preferred negotiation tools.

"Very well. Dominic, you should understand that your father and I have had extensive financial dealings -" he started again, apparently determined to test my legendary temper.

"What do you want from me, you bottom-feeding parasite? Cut to the chase," I interrupted, my voice dropping to the tone that had preceded numerous unfortunate accidents in our territory.

"I provided your father with substantial loans for his various enterprises, and I'm currently representing him in his legal difficulties. He specifically instructed me to approach you regarding settlement of his debts and my considerable legal fees." The sheer audacity of his statement made me release a sound that was part laughter, part growl.

"Kellen, do you have any idea who you're attempting to shake down?" I asked, noting the first flicker of fear in his calculating eyes.

"Listen, Dominic, blood is blood in this business. You carry the Frost name, and in our circles, family debts -"

"I wouldn't piss on that name if it was on fire! Feel free to tell every scumbag from here to Chicago that Marcus doesn't honor his debts. But understand this with crystal clarity - you won't extract a single bloody cent from me or my operation. And I strongly advise against approaching my mother or sister with this pathetic extortion attempt, because if you do, I'll have you charged with harassment before I personally demonstrate why they call me the family's most creative problem solver." My voice carried the deadly calm that had made grown men soil themselves.

"Dominic, be reasonable. If word spreads through our networks that a Frost has unpaid debts, it could create serious complications for your standing in the organization," he continued, the threat wrapped in legal terminology.

"Kellen, if you dare attempt to transfer that genetic mistake's problems to me or my household, I will erase you from existence like the insignificant insect you are. You know damn well I have the firepower, connections, and complete lack of moral restraint necessary to excavate every dirty secret in your

miserable life and end your pathetic career in the most unpleasant way imaginable." My voice remained conversational, which somehow made the threat even more terrifying. "And for your information, spread whatever lies you want through the underground. Marcus was blood-exiled years ago. In our family's terms, he's a walking corpse. His debts died with his membership. Am I making myself sufficiently clear?"

"Crystal clear as fresh blood!" he replied, sweat beading on his forehead despite the air conditioning. "I sincerely apologize for this intrusion. Perhaps it would be wisest if I withdrew from Marcus's defense entirely."

"Do whatever you think will keep you breathing, just never darken my doorway again."

Kellen practically fled my office, looking like he'd just received a personal visit from the Grim Reaper. He wouldn't risk provoking our family further; everyone in the legal underworld was well aware of my reputation for creative solutions to persistent problems.

"Damn, he left here looking like he'd just been measured for a coffin," Zoe remarked, entering with that predatory smile that had intimidated countless rivals.

"He received exactly the response his stupidity deserved," I replied simply.

"Dominic Frost laying down the law with maximum intimidation? I absolutely love it!" She narrowed her eyes with genuine appreciation. "Look at you now, commanding your empire with an iron fist. Nothing like that perpetually hungover playboy who used to stumble into that chair every morning, reeking of cheap perfume and regret, when I first started managing your disasters."

"You terrifying little genius, you saved my worthless life!" I smiled genuinely at the woman who had transformed me from a liability into one of the family's most valuable assets.

"You should be saying that to Gemma," she responded with a knowing smirk that suggested she was already planning something lethal.

"If you hadn't beaten some discipline into that self-destructive mess of a man, I wouldn't have had even the slightest chance of winning my goddess's heart. You literally resurrected me from the dead, Zoe."

"Stop it, you're going to make me emotional!" Zoe pretended to wipe away a tear with exaggerated drama, though we both knew she was more likely to shed blood than tears. We dissolved into the kind of laughter that would have sent civilians running for their lives, all tension from Kellen's pathetic extortion attempt completely eliminated by our shared understanding of just how thoroughly we owned this blood-soaked world.

Chapter 375: Wild Night Begins

Gemma's POV

The week had dragged on like a nightmare, leaving me completely exhausted. Nick's threatening calls hadn't stopped, though Daniel assured me the surveillance operation was yielding excellent results. They were building an airtight case against him, including evidence of his connections to rival families that would guarantee his permanent removal from the streets. Still, every time my phone buzzed with his number, my blood ran cold, never knowing what new death threat awaited me.

As if dealing with a psychotic street thug wasn't enough stress, Dominic had been driving me absolutely mad since learning that Gerard's sisters were planning my bachelorette celebration. He constantly interrogated me about their arrangements, questioned why I'd trusted them with such an important event, and expressed concerns about what he dramatically termed "dangerous liaisons." I repeatedly assured him that I knew nothing about their plans but that there was nothing to fear. Yet constantly, he'd suggest abandoning our families and soldiers to spend the night locked away together in his safe house. Despite his relentless pressure, I held firm—I deserved my bachelorette celebration, and it was going to be spectacular, whether he approved or not.

Now, I was ready for my party at Nadia's heavily fortified residence. Dominic would escort me there before joining his crew for his bachelor night. My phone rang again—undoubtedly Nick attempting to sabotage my evening. I refused to let that animal ruin tonight and declined the call. Heading downstairs, I found my lethal fiancé waiting with that predatory smile that never failed to make my pulse race.

"Remember to conduct yourself appropriately, Miss Gemma. You belong to a very dangerous man now," Dominic warned as he pulled up to Nadia's compound, past the armed sentries at the gate.

"Should I remind you of the same obligation?" I replied, amused by his possessive concern.

"Unnecessary. I’m just playing cards with my soldiers. You, however, are about to enter a celebration organized by Gerard’s completely unpredictable sisters," Dominic finally voiced his true fears, making me laugh.

"Relax, my handsome killer. You know you’re the only one who owns me." I pulled him close for a kiss, and his powerful arms encircled me like steel bands.

"What do you think about abandoning this circus and having our bachelor and bachelorette parties together, just you and me in my private suite?" he murmured after claiming my mouth, his breath hot against my ear.

"I think they’d hunt us down and drag us back by force," I replied, smiling against the warm skin of his throat.

"Lovebirds, save the passion for the honeymoon next week. Tonight is still bachelor and bachelorette night," Gerard called out, emerging from the house with Vincenzo flanking him like a bodyguard.

"Quentin, what exactly have your sisters orchestrated?" Dominic demanded, his curiosity clearly consuming him.

"No intelligence whatsoever! But knowing them, prepare for complete chaos. Nadia even sent Carmen to stay at a secured safe house," Gerard added, only intensifying Dominic’s anxiety.

"Gemma, that settles it—you’re not remaining here!" Dominic seized my hand, ready to drag me back to the armored vehicle.

"Stop right there, Dominic! I’m staying and I’m going to have the time of my life. You go play poker and spend the entire night wondering what’s happening here—that’ll be the most entertaining part for me." My voice carried a dangerous challenge.

"That’s sadistic!" Dominic’s green eyes narrowed at me like a predator’s.

"Don’t you trust me?" I asked, feigning wounded innocence.

"With my life and my empire," Dominic surrendered with a resigned sigh.

"Well, goodbye then!" I gave him a fierce kiss, spun around, and strode inside without looking back.

The moment I crossed the threshold, I was greeted with explosive screams, party horns, and thunderous applause. Elaine approached, placing a headband adorned with a miniature bridal veil on my head. The decorations were breathtaking—crimson and ivory everywhere, with blood-red roses adorning the living room, black and gold balloons floating above, and an elegantly arranged table groaning under an array of tempting delicacies.

"Alright, future queen, prepare for an unforgettably wild night!" Erica announced, handing me a crystal glass of champagne.

"Ladies, you've exceeded all expectations! Everything looks absolutely magnificent. Thank you!" I marveled at their meticulous attention to every detail.

"Save your gratitude for later. Tonight will be burned into your memory forever," Elaine declared, pulling me to the center where everyone gathered to embrace me.

All my allies had come, including Phoebe, though I noticed Brenda's conspicuous absence. Phoebe explained the event was strictly adults only. My grandmother, who had arrived earlier that day and was staying at my mother's secured location, surprised me with her presence, touching my heart deeply.

"Sweetheart, I'm ready to raise hell! These two promised to make these old bones dance," my grandmother hugged me excitedly, gesturing toward Erica and Elaine with obvious delight.

"Ladies, everyone find your positions because the entertainment is about to commence," Elaine announced with theatrical flair. "We'll begin with the lingerie unveiling, followed by some provocative photography from our talented artist, Blair. Then we'll indulge in risqué truth or dare, enjoy an intimate toy demonstration, take a seduction lesson, and conclude with a very special surprise."

"Grandma, I’m selecting a personal massager for you—you can choose which style," Erica informed my grandmother, who was happily sipping her drink and seemed absolutely thrilled about her upcoming acquisition.

"What precisely does ’risqué truth or dare’ involve?" I asked, already dreading the inevitable answer.

"Only the most intimate questions permitted. We all want to know if your married life will be explosive," Elaine replied with mischief sparkling dangerously in her eyes.

What other surprises did this night hold in store? These two were absolutely unhinged and completely unpredictable. But I was having incredible fun, so much that I completely forgot about Nick’s existence and his persistent harassment. I deliberately silenced my phone, refusing to let that street scum cast any shadow over my celebration.

Chapter 376: Snake in the Box

Gemma’s POV

The safe house penthouse buzzed with anticipation as the girls prepared for the evening’s activities. Dominic’s security team had swept the building twice before allowing us inside, but tonight felt like a rare moment of normalcy in our dangerous world. I found myself seated in the center of our circle as Erica placed a bowl filled with folded paper slips before me.

"Time to start the fun, ladies! Everyone grab your gift boxes," Erica announced with a mischievous grin.

"Here’s how it works, Gemma," Audrey explained, adjusting her position on the plush sofa. "You’ll draw a paper and read the embarrassing story written on it. To win the lingerie gift, you need to guess which one of us lived through that mortifying experience. Get it wrong, and you have to share your own embarrassing moment. When you unwrap your present, keep your eyes closed and guess what it is by touch alone. Sound good?"

"This sounds absolutely wild. Let’s see what secrets you’ve all been hiding," I replied, reaching for the first slip with eager fingers. I unfolded it and read aloud: "On my first intimate encounter, my partner and I decided to educate ourselves by watching some instructional videos since we were both inexperienced. When we attempted to recreate a position we’d seen, I accidentally kicked him square in

the face during our awkward maneuvering. He tumbled off the bed and broke his nose on impact. I spent the night still untouched and in the emergency room fabricating an explanation for his injury."

The room exploded with laughter as the absurdity of the story sank in.

"No way this actually happened! Are we really sharing stories this mortifying?" I couldn't contain my giggles. "This has to be Zoe's story. That woman researches everything before attempting it, even in the bedroom!"

"Way too obvious!" Zoe groaned, tossing me her beautifully wrapped gift containing an exquisite piece of black lace lingerie.

As the game progressed, each confession became more outrageous than the previous. Then I drew a paper describing a romantic encounter between a couple at a countryside estate, where passion overtook them under the stars until the woman stepped backward into a hidden creek, dragging her lover down with her as she desperately tried to regain her balance. With Erica already eliminated from guessing, it had to be either Audrey or my grandmother. I confidently selected Audrey and was completely mistaken.

"Grandma? You cannot be serious right now!" I gasped, my jaw dropping in complete shock.

"Oh, sweetheart, this happened during one of your childhood birthday celebrations at that estate your mother had rented for the party, remember?" My grandmother spoke with such casual ease that everyone dissolved into uncontrollable laughter. "Your grandfather possessed such passionate intensity back then..." She fanned herself theatrically, sending us all into fresh waves of hysteria.

"Hold on, I distinctly remember both of you returning to the house completely soaked! Didn't you claim it was because a snake startled you and made you lose your footing, and grandpa fell trying to help?" I questioned, still reeling from this revelation.

"Indeed, darling, it was definitely because of a snake..." My grandmother delivered a scandalous wink, triggering another eruption of laughter throughout the room.

"Wait, there’s still an unopened present on the table," Nadia observed, pointing toward a mysterious package sitting apart from the others.

Audrey glanced around our circle with confusion. "But everyone already distributed theirs."

"Maybe Dominic arranged a surprise delivery?" Ivy suggested with curiosity.

"You think so? An unexpected gift?" Erica picked up the box with slight wariness and handed it to me. "Well, since there’s no corresponding paper to draw, Gemma, why don’t you share one of your own embarrassing moments and then open it?"

After recounting a mortifying story from my college days, I closed my eyes and began unwrapping the mysterious present. That decision proved to be a terrible mistake.

"DON’T PUT YOUR HAND INSIDE THAT BOX, GEMMA!" Audrey’s terrified scream cut through the air like a blade.

My eyes snapped open to find Audrey standing directly in front of me, her face drained of all color. I screamed in pure terror, reflexively hurling the box upward. She caught it with lightning-fast reflexes and immediately secured the lid back in place.

"What on earth was that?" my mother asked with growing alarm.

"There’s a live snake inside this box, and not the metaphorical kind grandma encountered in those bushes," Audrey replied, her voice trembling as she held the container with shaking hands. "What should I do with this thing?"

"A snake? What do you mean by an actual snake?" Bee asked with mounting nervousness.

"I mean a real, breathing, venomous snake! An actual reptile! Someone help me figure out what to do!" Audrey was nearly in tears, shifting anxiously from foot to foot while maintaining her grip on the dangerous package.

Nadia immediately contacted Dominic's security detail, who arrived within moments and carefully removed the box from Audrey's trembling grasp. Tears streamed down my face uncontrollably. This had to be Nick's escalated retaliation—he'd been flooding my phone with threatening calls throughout the evening. But how had he discovered the location of our private celebration?

Zoe took charge of the situation and contacted Daniel directly, who immediately dispatched a specialized team to collect the package and conduct a comprehensive security sweep of the building. She managed to convince Daniel not to inform Dominic of the incident, knowing he would abandon whatever family business he was conducting and rush over, effectively ending our celebration. Yet I remained deeply shaken—the festive atmosphere seemed permanently damaged by this sinister intrusion.

However, my determined friends refused to allow Nick's snake delivery to destroy our evening. Once the dangerous reptile was safely removed and police began investigating how the threatening package had been delivered past building security, Audrey and Erica took complete control of the situation, cracking jokes and serving the delicious appetizers they'd prepared earlier. Before long, we found ourselves completely absorbed in an amusing presentation of adult novelty items that had everyone laughing despite the earlier scare.

The evening's true highlight arrived at midnight when three professional male entertainers made their entrance—dressed as a firefighter, police officer, and airline pilot. They performed sensual dances while gradually removing their costumes, ending their routine wearing only fitted swim trunks. The performance remained tasteful yet undeniably entertaining, with the gentlemen maintaining complete professionalism throughout their act. My grandmother enjoyed herself most when they positioned her chair at the center of our circle and performed an exclusive dance around her. The elderly lady definitely harbored more secrets than any of us had imagined!

Chapter 377: Snake in the Circle

Dominic's POV

I arrived at the Social Union with Gerard and my nephew Vincenzo, members of the Thorne family organization. The guys had outdone themselves for my bachelor party, securing our private back room that doubled as a strategy meeting place when needed. Pool table for casual talks, poker setup for serious negotiations, vintage bar stocked with the finest Italian spirits, and leather sofas where we'd planned countless operations. Tonight, it was all about celebrating my last night before claiming Gemma as my mafia queen.

"Ready for your final night as a free man?" Xavier greeted me with his trademark grin, pressing a glass of our family's imported whiskey into my hand.

Caleb approached, shaking his head with amusement. "Honestly thought you'd never settle down, Dominic. Especially after all the chaos with your old man."

That's when I noticed their matching black t-shirts featuring a cartoon version of me in chains, with Gemma holding the key. "GAME OVER" blazed across the bottom in blood-red letters.

"Real mature for a bunch of made men," I muttered, though their loyalty warmed something in my chest that had been cold for too long.

The evening progressed with drinking games that would make civilian bartenders weep. Based on the amount of premium liquor we were downing, I'd be lucky to remember the combination to our family safe tomorrow morning.

Several drinks later, I noticed Daniel slip out to take a call from one of his police contacts. When he returned, his expression had shifted to the stone-cold mask he wore during family business. He immediately pulled Xavier aside for a hushed conversation. Something was wrong. Daniel never stepped out during celebrations unless someone was bleeding or dead.

It reminded me that Gemma had asked me to mention something to Daniel about increased security around her shop, but I'd completely forgotten in the wedding preparations. I made a mental note to discuss it before we left tonight.

Before I could act on that thought, both Daniel and Xavier approached with the kind of serious expressions that usually preceded someone getting their legs broken.

"Dominic, I need to tell you something," Daniel began carefully. "But don't panic. Everything's been handled by my crew."

My entire body went rigid. In our world, 'handled' could mean anything from a warning to a shallow grave. "Are the girls safe?"

"They are. But Gemma received an unwelcome gift at her bachelorette party. My security team neutralized the threat immediately. The ladies don't want their celebration interrupted because of this incident."

His careful phrasing was making my blood pressure spike. In the mafia, we didn't speak in riddles unless the news was catastrophic. "Cut the diplomatic bullshit, Daniel. What happened?"

"Someone sent Gemma a gift box containing a venomous snake. Nobody was injured, no bites, no casualties. The women were shaken, naturally, but it's been resolved."

I shot to my feet, the whiskey glass hitting the floor and shattering. "I'm going to her. I need to see Gemma with my own eyes."

"No, you're not." Xavier stepped directly into my path, and I could see his hand resting casually near his concealed weapon. "Daniel's soldiers have secured the perimeter. The women specifically requested to continue their night, and you're not going to be the one who ruins that by charging in like some amateur street thug."

"But Xavier, someone tried to—"

"No arguments. She's at your sister's compound, surrounded by enough firepower to stop a small army. It was an assassination attempt that failed spectacularly."

I knew he was right. Barging into their celebration would only confirm that our enemies had successfully disrupted our lives. "Fine. You're right."

I waited for them to become distracted by a heated poker game before slipping toward the bathroom to call Gemma privately. I needed to hear her voice, needed the confirmation that she was truly unharmed.

As I headed down the hallway, Beatrix intercepted me like a spider waiting in her web. This woman simply refused to accept that her place in my life had been permanently terminated.

"Hello, darling," she purred, her voice carrying the fake sweetness she used when plotting someone's downfall.

"Beatrix, I've told you repeatedly to disappear from my sight." I tried to step around her, but she shifted to block my path like she owned the place. "Move, or I'll have you moved."

"Dominic, you're going to deeply regret treating me with such disrespect," she said with the kind of confidence that suggested she knew something I didn't. "I give it mere days before you come crawling back to me for comfort."

"Crawling back for what?"

"When that pathetic little shop girl abandons you, sweetheart, you'll remember who truly belongs in your world." The certainty in her voice was as chilling as it was delusional.

"Abandon me?" I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity. "You're completely detached from reality, Beatrix. Gemma and I are bound by blood and loyalty. We're getting married next week, and nothing in hell or earth will stop that."

"That's what you believe, but fate has other arrangements."

"Are you having some kind of mental breakdown? Move on with your miserable existence, Beatrix. Find some other mark who can tolerate your poison, and forget I ever existed."

"I can't do that," she insisted, eyes gleaming with dangerous obsession. "Because I belong to you, and you belong to me. Your wedding will never happen."

The malicious certainty in her expression made everything click into place with terrifying clarity. The implications of her words, combined with the snake attack, painted a picture that made my blood run cold.

I stared at Beatrix in complete shock. Her cold smile and predatory gaze told me everything I needed to know. It wasn’t just Nick and the street-level threats I had to worry about anymore. This woman was potentially just as lethal, and she had access to our world.

I turned away from her and strode back to my brothers.

"Daniel," I called as soon as I reentered the room, my voice cutting through their conversation.

He glanced up, immediately reading the urgency in my tone. "What is it?"

"Do you have any leads on who orchestrated the snake attack?" I demanded.

"Dominic, stay calm. My investigators are pursuing several angles. The women are protected, that’s our priority."

"Daniel, it was Beatrix," I stated with absolute conviction.

His expression transformed instantly into the cold calculation of a seasoned soldier. "Explain."

"I just confronted her in the hallway. She guaranteed that my wedding won’t happen. She was completely certain about it. The snake was her opening move."

Gerard immediately guided me to a chair while the others formed a protective circle. "Breathe, plan your words, and tell us everything."

Within moments, every eye in the room was focused on me as I recounted my disturbing encounter with Beatrix and her barely concealed threats.

When I finished, Daniel nodded grimly. "It fits the profile perfectly. I’ll assign a surveillance team to monitor her movements immediately." He pulled out his encrypted phone and stepped away to coordinate with his network.

I felt ice-cold panic spreading through my chest. While we'd been focused on external threats like Nick and random street criminals, we'd completely overlooked the enemy within our own social circle. The poisoned chocolates incident months ago should have been our warning, but we'd dismissed her as merely unstable rather than truly dangerous.

Now I was certain that Beatrix wasn't just trying to break up my relationship. She was actively trying to kill Gemma.

Chapter 378: The Perfect Bait

Nick's POV

That stubborn bitch Gemma thought she could ignore me by hiding behind her mafia boyfriend's protection. I'd been calling her burner phone for days with no response. Where the hell was she holing up now? The Thorne family compound? Some safe house? I needed to teach her a lesson about what happens when you cross someone like me, but my plans had to wait. Stevie, the underboss who controlled our neighborhood rackets, required my attention this week to help audit the books at his gambling operation.

Stevie wanted me relocated to his fortified compound up in the hills outside the city, but I preferred staying at Nancy's downtown apartment. Better access to the streets, easier to blend in with civilians when needed. Still, when an underboss gives you orders, you follow them. Stevie had given me a short window to handle my Gemma situation before the mandatory relocation.

This week would have to be enough to resolve both my Gemma problem and eliminate Nancy permanently. My patience with Nancy was running thin, but whatever happened to her would need to look like rival family business. She had connections to Stevie's crew, after all. I'd originally planned to frame the whole job on that degenerate Marcus Frost, but the old man got himself arrested by the feds and was trying to back out of our arrangement. The greedy bastard still wanted Gemma for his own twisted purposes.

Nancy remained useful for now though. She'd somehow managed to befriend Gemma's mother Willow, which presented an opportunity I couldn't afford to waste. When she came home recently bragging about meeting Willow at some community center, I saw the perfect opening. My plan was crystallizing: snatch Gemma using her mother as bait, then disappear to Stevie's hilltop fortress where no one would ever find us.

"Nancy!" I bellowed from the living room.

"What the hell do you want now?" She emerged from the kitchen, whiskey glass in hand like always.

"How's your little friendship with mama Willow progressing?" I questioned, leaning against the doorframe.

"That naive woman practically worships the ground I walk on! She believes every sob story I feed her. She's even trying to help me find legitimate work through her church connections," Nancy said with a cruel laugh.

"Perfect! We execute the plan this week. I need to grab Gemma and head up to the hills. I promised Stevie I'd be relocated soon," I informed her.

"About damn time! I was starting to think you'd lost your nerve dealing with the Thorne family," Nancy complained, which had become her constant refrain lately.

"Just waiting for the right opening. And I don't know why you're complaining so much. You're going to miss having me around," I said, snatching the whiskey from her hand and downing it.

"I've got my own schemes brewing, Nick, but I'll visit you occasionally up there. Maybe I'll even let you fuck me right in front of your precious little Gemma," Nancy said brazenly, shameless as always.

"Now you're talking! Maybe we'll even have ourselves a proper threesome once I break her in," I replied, savoring the thought of having both women completely under my control.

"You're just as perverted as that sick old man Marcus," Nancy laughed.

"Speaking of Isaac, that crazy bastard went way too far. Is everything the newspapers are saying about his arrest actually true?"

"Every disgusting word. He's a demented pervert who preys on young women, but he especially gets off on stealing what belongs to his own son. The Thorne family uses him for the really dirty work," Nancy's expression grew distant. "I was so stupid getting mixed up with their family politics. I should have just handed that Kimberly girl over to him back then, but I never thought he'd actually convince the family to give Dominic control of the tech operations."

"Can that old bastard even still perform? Does he have anything left at his age?" I asked, genuinely curious about the legendary Marcus Frost.

"Remember that night when you two had me here on this very couch? The old man's still fully functional, doesn't even need enhancement pills. But he's nothing remarkable. And he can't begin to compare to his son Dominic. That man isn't just devastatingly handsome and wealthy—he's absolutely incredible between the sheets. No wonder your precious Gemma fell so hard for him."

"Watch your fucking mouth, Nancy!" I snarled. "Gemma belongs to me! And I guarantee that pampered rich boy doesn't come close to what I can deliver."

"Don't delude yourself, Nick. Dominic was superior to you back when I had my chance with him, and he's had years of experience since then. Dominic Frost is absolutely unmatched in bed." Nancy was deliberately provoking me, and my already thin patience was evaporating completely.

"Don't push me too far, Nancy. I don't have much tolerance left for your games." I grabbed her by the throat, and she immediately began clawing at my grip, struggling for air.

"Let go, you psychotic animal," she gasped, her face reddening as she fought against my hold. I stared directly into her panicked eyes to ensure she understood exactly who was in control before finally releasing her. "You're fucking insane!"

"Just a friendly reminder about the chain of command around here," I said calmly, finishing what remained of her whiskey. "Contact your church friend and set something up with her this week. You understand the complete plan, correct?" I demanded.

"I'm not a complete idiot, Nick. I'll arrange to meet with Willow this week, and we'll use that trusting woman to get access to her bitch daughter. I just want to know what your intentions are regarding the

baby, because you sure as hell aren't going to raise another man's child, and I refuse to have that bastard interfering with my future plans." Nancy continued her incessant complaining.

"Don't worry about those details, I've got everything handled," I said simply.

I had already developed a brilliant strategy. My lawyer contact in Stevie's crew had explained the inheritance laws clearly: if the father wasn't legally married when he died, his child would become the sole heir to everything. If something tragic happened to the child afterward, the mother would inherit the complete fortune. So I would exercise patience, allow the child to be born, then eliminate the wealthy pretty boy Dominic. Once everything legally transferred to the infant heir, I'd dispose of the child as well. Gemma, by then my lawfully wedded wife, would inherit Dominic's entire fortune—meaning I would control every dollar of the Frost family money. The plan was absolutely flawless! I couldn't suppress my satisfied smile.

"Whatever twisted scheme you're plotting, I'd rather remain ignorant. That smile tells me it involves serious bloodshed. Let me message Willow right now," Nancy said suspiciously, reaching for her phone.

"No text messages. Call her directly. I need to know if Gemma's currently staying with her," I demanded. My anxiety was steadily mounting—I desperately needed information about Gemma's whereabouts since she'd been completely ignoring my calls.

"You've completely lost track of your little obsession, haven't you?" Nancy mocked me.

"Mind how you speak about her, Nancy," I warned dangerously, but she simply shrugged with indifference.

"I can't just call out of nowhere, Nick. It would seem highly suspicious and could potentially destroy her trust in me," Nancy explained logically.

"Fine, then send the goddamn message immediately," I huffed impatiently.

As the minutes dragged by with no response from Willow, my frustration continued building. She and Gemma had to be together somewhere, probably planning their next move.

That evening, my patience grew thinner with each passing hour of silence.

Chapter 379: Into the Snare

Gemma's POV

My bachelorette party had been the talk of Port Serenity's underground scene. Erica and Audrey had orchestrated a night that would be remembered in mafia circles for months, though Dominic's face when he arrived to collect me suggested he didn't appreciate the snake incident that nearly turned celebration into catastrophe. His expression remained etched with deadly concern until we were safely back in our fortified penthouse.

Once inside our sanctuary, Dominic revealed his suspicion that Beatrix had orchestrated the venomous attack. The revelation left me speechless. I'd always known the former mafia socialite was dangerous, but attempting murder at my bachelorette party seemed extreme even for someone of her twisted nature.

Sunday passed in blissful domesticity within our heavily guarded compound. Dominic and I treasured these rare moments of peace, knowing the coming week would be consumed by final preparations for our blood oath ceremony. Despite the Thorne family's meticulous arrangements, there would inevitably be territorial disputes and rival family tensions to navigate before I walked down the aisle.

Monday arrived with the usual demands of running legitimate front operations, amplified by my impending absence from Port Serenity's business district. With our honeymoon in the family's private Caribbean compound looming, I needed to handle my responsibilities at the financial consulting firm early. By Thursday, I'd be stationed at the Thorne family's beach estate, overseeing the wedding security arrangements. My schedule was so packed that lunch consisted of hurried bites between encrypted communications, and I even dismissed Lila when she appeared with her afternoon coffee ritual.

The persistent ringing of my secure phone interrupted my workflow. Nick's number flashed on the screen repeatedly. I'd ignored his calls since Saturday, hoping the street-level punk would eventually understand that crossing a Thorne family Capo's territory had consequences. Today, he seemed particularly desperate, calling multiple times in rapid succession before finally going silent. I exhaled in relief, my battle-hardened nerves settling momentarily.

When my phone rang again shortly after, I considered activating our family's communication blackout protocols. A glance at the screen showed my mother's contact information, and I answered without hesitation.

"Hi, Mom! Everything secure?" I asked, still reviewing financial reports that served as covers for money laundering operations.

"Little dove, precious little dove. When will you learn to answer when the family calls?" The voice that responded sent ice through my veins like a blade to the heart.

"Nick, what are you doing with my mother's phone?" My voice remained steady despite the terror clawing at my chest—a skill learned from months in the mafia world.

"Little dove, you should be asking what I'm planning to do to your interfering mother." His laughter slithered through the phone like a poisonous snake preparing to strike.

"Nick, don't touch my mother. Your quarrel is with me." My fingers tightened around the phone, knuckles white with restrained fury.

"It was with you, little dove, but you decided to make things complicated by hiding behind those Thorne family killers. So right now, this involves you, me, and your precious mommy. A real pain in the ass, actually. She never approved of me, did she, little dove? And I never had any patience for her meddling."

"Nick, please, leave my mother out of this!" Fear consumed me like wildfire, spreading through my body despite my training in handling mafia threats.

"Little dove, there's only one way I'll leave your dear mommy breathing—if you come here alone to collect her. Then, maybe I'll let her leave in one piece, because she's still intact right now, but I can't guarantee how long my patience will last." His voice carried the casual menace of someone with nothing left to lose.

"Nick, what do you want from me?" I asked, though his demands were painfully obvious.

"Don’t play stupid, little dove! I want you back. So you’re going to leave that fake job of yours right now, without that armed shadow who follows you everywhere, get in an unmarked car, and come meet me. Oh, and without alerting your mafia boyfriend’s network, naturally!" He sounded almost euphoric at his own scheme.

"Nick, you’ve lost your mind! Release my mother and disappear before the Thorne family finds you." Tears streamed down my face despite my attempts to maintain composure.

"I’m crazy about you, little dove!" His laughter chilled me to the bone like winter winds off the harbor. "You have a short time to reach this location, or your mommy’s going to have an unfortunate accident."

"Nick, don’t harm my mother," I pleaded, abandoning all pretense of strength.

"That depends entirely on your cooperation."

"Let me speak with her."

"Of course, my love, when you arrive, I’ll allow you to talk. But you better move fast—your countdown starts now and you only have limited time remaining. Tick tock." He disconnected, his maniacal laughter echoing in my ears.

My mind raced through scenarios. Nick had completely snapped. I should have taken his earlier calls seriously—at least then Dominic’s surveillance network might have traced his location. Now I was trapped, forced into an impossible corner. I had no doubt the unstable criminal would hurt my mother simply to inflict maximum emotional damage on me.

As I frantically weighed my limited options, his message arrived with an address in the most dangerous part of Port Serenity’s industrial district. Time was already running short—the location was deep in neutral territory, far from Thorne family protection. There seemed no alternative; I had to comply with his demands and go alone. I steadied my breathing and summoned my security detail.

"Do you need assistance, Miss Gemma?" Hunter appeared in my doorway, hand instinctively near his concealed weapon.

"Yes, Hunter, would you mind getting me something to eat? I'm starving, but buried in these financial reports." I manufactured a casual tone, hating myself for deceiving someone whose job was protecting my life.

"Of course, miss. What would you prefer?" Hunter's professional kindness only intensified my guilt. He trusted me not to violate security protocols, as I'd always been compliant with Dominic's protective measures.

"You know that Italian place near the restaurant where the family conducts business meetings? Could you bring me their special pasta with extra sauce?" I chose a location requiring significant travel time to ensure his lengthy absence.

"Absolutely, miss. I'll leave immediately." Hunter smiled and departed through the reinforced doorway. Dominic would be absolutely murderous when he discovered I'd manipulated his security arrangements, but my mother's survival depended on my compliance.

The instant Hunter vanished into the armored elevator, I grabbed my purse and sprinted toward the emergency stairwell. The elevators contained surveillance cameras connected directly to Thorne family headquarters, and I couldn't risk detection. I slipped off my heels and raced down multiple flights of stairs, only replacing them when I reached the parking garage.

Outside the building, fortune briefly favored me—a taxi was dropping off a passenger near the entrance. I jumped inside and provided Nick's address. The driver examined it with obvious alarm, his face reflecting genuine concern.

"Lady, are you sure you know where you're heading?" he asked, eyes finding mine in the rearview mirror with unmistakable worry.

"Actually, no. I'm meeting someone, but I've never been to that area before." Anxiety saturated my words despite my efforts to sound confident.

"It's extremely dangerous territory, lady. Gang warfare happens there regularly. You'll never find another cab willing to pick you up from that neighborhood. Maybe you should reschedule this meeting somewhere safer?" His authentic concern only deepened my growing dread.

"That would be infinitely better, but unfortunately it’s not possible." I stared out the window at Port Serenity’s skyline, heart constricting with the certainty that Nick had no intention of allowing me to return alive.

Chapter 380: Missing Phone Trap

Vincenzo’s POV

School had become increasingly demanding lately, especially with our literature professor assigning obscure texts that seemed nearly impossible to locate. I had spent days calling every bookstore in the city until I finally tracked down the last copy at a mall across town. With the professor’s warned examination approaching, I couldn’t risk failing, so I made the long trip to secure that elusive volume.

Since I was already at the upscale shopping center, I decided to browse around after purchasing my book. I headed straight to the bookstore first, even though I had reserved the copy, years of living in a family where trust was earned through verification had taught me to never assume anything was secure until it was physically in my hands. With the book safely tucked in my leather messenger bag, I strolled through the elegant food court when I spotted a familiar face. Aunt Willow was sitting at an expensive café, engaged in conversation with someone.

"Aunt Willow! What an unexpected pleasure!" I approached their table, immediately noticing she was with a younger woman who, despite being conventionally attractive, had something calculating about her demeanor that set off my instincts.

"Vincenzo, darling!" Aunt Willow rose gracefully from her seat to embrace me, her designer jewelry catching the light. "What brings you so far from the family district?"

"Had to hunt down this academic text. Could only find it here," I explained, holding up my shopping bag as evidence while discretely scanning the woman across from her.

"Well, join us for espresso! Let me introduce you, this is Nancy. Nancy, this is Vincenzo, my nephew."

I acknowledged the woman with practiced politeness, though she scrutinized my face with an intensity that made my skin crawl. Her smile seemed rehearsed, reminding me of the social climbers who frequented family gatherings, pretending friendship while calculating their next move.

"I wouldn’t want to intrude on your business discussion, Aunt," I said carefully, sensing the undercurrent of tension.

"Nonsense! Please, sit down," Aunt Willow insisted, practically guiding me into the chair beside her with the kind of insistence that brooked no argument.

After ordering an espresso, I asked, "So what brings you both to this part of the city? Taking a break from family obligations?"

"I’ve concluded my appointments for the day," Aunt Willow explained with her usual elegance. "I promised to assist Nancy in securing a new position. Thanks to your mother’s recommendation, she has an interview at your father’s legitimate enterprise tomorrow."

Nancy continued staring at me with that artificial expression. Between that and what were obviously enhanced assets straining against her low-cut blouse, everything about her radiated deception.

"That sounds promising," I replied diplomatically, though I couldn’t help thinking if my mother had witnessed how Nancy presented herself, she might have reconsidered facilitating the introduction. "Which position are you seeking?"

"Executive assistant. Your father will conduct the interview personally," Aunt Willow said with enthusiasm, while Nancy herself seemed strangely detached from the conversation.

"Do you truly need this position, Nancy?" I asked directly, my family’s training in reading people making me suspicious of her odd behavior.

She immediately shifted into a pitiful tone that instantly activated every warning bell in my head. "Oh yes, desperately. I care for my aging father since his retirement, and I lost my previous position when my employer, a private practice physician, passed away unexpectedly."

Something wasn’t calculating correctly. My father often shared stories about legitimate job candidates who genuinely needed employment to support their families. Their desperation was authentic, their

gratitude sincere. But Nancy was carrying what appeared to be a brand new designer handbag and wearing an expensive timepiece that contradicted her sob story entirely.

"That does sound challenging," I said, formulating a strategy. "Listen, since we're all here, why don't I contact my father and see if he can accommodate the interview today instead? My driver is waiting outside, I could transport you to the office immediately."

"Oh, please don't trouble yourself. Tomorrow's arrangement is perfectly acceptable," she replied with that same practiced smile, though I caught a flash of something like panic in her eyes.

"It's truly no inconvenience," I pressed, watching her reaction carefully. "What do you think, Aunt Willow? We could escort Nancy to her interview and then meet Aunt Gemma for our usual coffee afterward."

"That sounds wonderful! But can your father accommodate such short notice?" Aunt Willow asked, though I could see she was pleased with my initiative.

"I'll call him now. I'm confident he'll make the necessary arrangements." I knew my father would agree to this favor, especially since I'd be personally vouching for her transportation. He had always been generous with employment opportunities for those truly in need.

"Let's proceed, Nancy! Perhaps you could begin working tomorrow!" Aunt Willow clapped her hands together excitedly while Nancy reluctantly agreed, looking anything but grateful for the expedited opportunity.

I dialed my father's secure line, and he immediately agreed to the impromptu interview, as I had predicted. Aunt Willow beamed with satisfaction at the arrangement.

"I'll contact Aunt Gemma to inform her we're coming by," I said, scrolling through my contacts. I dialed repeatedly with no response, which was highly unusual.

"Perhaps she's occupied with business," Aunt Willow suggested, though her expression showed concern.

"She always answers my calls. Even during meetings, she at least acknowledges and promises to return the call." I tried once more, and this time she picked up. "Auntie! Guess who I'm with?"

"Vincenzo?" Aunt Gemma's voice sounded strained, almost frightened. "I have no idea. Tell me."

"Aunt, is everything secure?" Her tone immediately triggered my protective instincts.

"Yes, everything's fine. Please tell me who you're with." She wasn't convincing anyone with that response.

"I'm with Aunt Willow! We're planning to visit you for coffee!" I reached over to squeeze Aunt Willow's hand reassuringly.

"Vincenzo, are you certain?" Aunt Gemma sounded almost panicked now.

Confused by her reaction, I replied, "Absolutely, I'm at the upscale mall with Aunt Willow right now. Here, speak with her directly."

I passed the phone to Aunt Willow, watching her expression change.

"Hello, sweetheart. Why do you sound like you've been crying?" Aunt Willow's face shifted to alarm.

"Mom! Mom, are you safe? Nick didn't harm you?" Aunt Gemma's voice broke into sobs that we could both hear.

Aunt Willow's expression transformed to horror. "Darling, I'm perfectly safe! I'm at the mall having coffee with a friend. I encountered Vincenzo, and we're coming to see you immediately. Where did you get such a terrifying idea?"

"Mom, Nick called me from your phone!" Aunt Gemma was clearly in distress.

Aunt Willow frantically searched through her designer purse. "My phone is missing, Gemma. Sweetheart, please tell me you're at the secure location."

"I'm in a taxi, Mom. I'm safe. I'm returning to the office immediately. Please meet me there."

After ending the call, I quickly settled the bill as we prepared to leave urgently.

"We need to move quickly," Aunt Willow said, her usual composure cracking. "I need to reach Gemma immediately."

As we stood to leave, I suddenly realized something crucial. "Wait, Aunt, where did your friend go?"

In our concern for Aunt Gemma's safety, neither of us had noticed Nancy slip away from the table during the phone call.

"How strange! Where could she have gone?" Aunt Willow scanned the crowded café area. "We'll contact her later to apologize, Vincenzo. Right now, we need to reach Gemma."

We rushed from the mall toward my armored vehicle. During the drive to Uncle Caleb's legitimate business front, I called him on the secure line to explain the developing situation. Then I called Aunt Gemma again, determined to maintain contact with her until we were all safely together. The pieces were falling into place in a pattern that made my blood run cold.