Mafia Mask 381

Chapter 381: x The Phone Con

Gemma’s POV

Each mile the taxi traveled toward the warehouse district deepened the dread in my chest. My hands trembled against my designer handbag as waves of terror consumed me. The elderly driver kept studying me through his rearview mirror, his weathered face creased with concern as he navigated the increasingly dangerous neighborhoods with deliberate caution. His driving was methodical and unhurried, as if he sensed the deadly nature of my destination.

The sudden buzzing of my encrypted phone made me jump. Vincenzo’s name flashed across the screen. I hesitated, my thumb hovering over the answer button. If I ignored the call, it would only raise suspicions within the Thorne organization. By now, Dominic had likely returned from his territory rounds but probably assumed I was handling family business in another sector. He wouldn’t sound the alarm yet. Taking a shaky breath, I answered.

"Gemma? Where the hell are you?" Vincenzo’s voice carried the dangerous edge that made even hardened soldiers tremble.

When he told me he was with my mother at Thorne headquarters, confusion crashed over me like ice water. Then my mother’s voice came through the speaker, and overwhelming relief broke through my composure. Tears streamed down my face as I explained how Nick had called me from her phone, threatening her life if I didn’t comply. The realization hit me like a physical blow—he had somehow obtained my mother’s phone but never had her. That street rat had been running a con all along.

"Miss?" The driver’s gentle voice cut through my emotional breakdown. "Should we turn around and head back to the business district?" His eyes in the rearview mirror held genuine worry.

"Yes, please," I managed between shuddering breaths. "Take me back to Thorne Tower."

His shoulders visibly relaxed. "Thank the Lord above! I knew something wasn’t right about this whole situation. That warehouse address you gave me—it’s deep in enemy gang territory. No respectable young lady like yourself should be going there alone, especially not dressed like money."

"You were protecting me. How did you know something was wrong?" I asked, desperate for conversation to steady my nerves.

"Decades of driving these streets teaches you to read the signs. Been navigating gang territories since before you were born, sweetheart," he said, executing a careful U-turn while checking for rival family surveillance. "Will your people be waiting for you when we get back?"

"My mother and my..." I hesitated, unsure how to explain Dominic's position in my life. "My family will be there."

"Then I'll pick up the pace," he said with a grandfatherly smile that reminded me of safety.

My phone rang again—Dominic this time, his voice carrying barely controlled fury when I answered.

"Gemma! Where the fuck are you right now? Are you safe?"

"I'm fine, Dominic. I'm in a taxi with a very protective driver, heading back to Thorne Tower," I assured him, recognizing the lethal concern beneath his anger.

"How long until you arrive?" The barely leashed violence in his voice was palpable, promising brutal retribution for whoever had threatened me.

"Soon," I estimated, recognizing the familiar skyline of the business district.

"I'll be waiting in the lobby with a full security detail. Don't ever do something like this again, Gemma. I couldn't survive losing you to some street punk's game."

His raw admission of vulnerability made my guilt intensify exponentially. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

After we disconnected, the driver transformed from cautious elder to determined protector, weaving through traffic with renewed purpose. My phone rang once more—Vincenzo again, his voice brooking no argument.

"Keep this line open until I can see you walking through those doors. I'm not hanging up."

When we finally pulled up to Thorne Tower's imposing entrance, Dominic stood flanked by Hunter and several armed security personnel. The driver helped me out and waved away my attempt to pay the fare.

"You keep that money, miss. Just remember—in this city, trust is a luxury that can get you killed," he advised before disappearing into traffic.

Dominic surged forward, pulling me into an embrace that felt like coming home to safety. I surrendered to his strength, letting the tears flow freely. Inside the marble lobby, my mother waited with Vincenzo and several other family associates. I broke from Dominic's protective arms and ran to her.

"Sweetheart, thank God you're alive," my mother whispered, holding me close.

"Mom, I thought that animal was going to execute you," I sobbed against her shoulder.

"Gemma, I don't understand what happened today. I went to meet someone at the mall's food court, and somehow my phone vanished. I definitely had it when I arrived," she explained, sounding genuinely confused.

"That woman you met was suspicious as hell, Mrs. Valance. She disappeared without any explanation," Vincenzo commented, his young face serious beyond his years.

"That was strange, wasn't it?" I looked at Dominic, whose expression had turned predatory.

"What's this bitch's name, Mrs. Valance?" Dominic asked with the quiet intensity that preceded bloodshed.

"Nancy," my mother answered. "I met her at the hospital where her father was supposedly receiving treatment. We started talking, and I felt sympathy for her situation. I was helping her find legitimate employment."

Dominic’s expression turned murderous. "Her last name?"

"I never learned her surname," my mother admitted. "Are you thinking it’s your former associate?" I asked, connecting the dangerous dots.

"It has to be. Your mother’s phone disappears while she’s with a woman named Nancy, and then Nick calls from that same device? That’s not coincidence—that’s coordination," Dominic said with deadly certainty.

"But Vincenzo would have recognized her," I countered.

"Actually, no. Vincenzo was just a child when my father dragged that toxic bitch into our lives. Their arrangement lasted barely a year before she moved on to richer targets," Dominic explained.

Vincenzo grimaced. "That woman seemed completely artificial. Like her enormous chest—definitely surgical enhancement. Do you have surveillance photos of this Nancy?"

"Fake tits and gold-digging attitude? Definitely sounds like her." Dominic shook his head. "I don’t keep photos of past mistakes, but Xavier might have intelligence files."

Within minutes of Dominic’s call, we were joined by Xavier, Ruby, Caleb, Ivy, and Lila—the full Thorne family council.

Ivy immediately confronted me with sisterly authority. "Gemma, you need to stop keeping family business secret! You could have confided in any of us before walking into a trap."

"I was terrified for my mother’s life," I defended weakly.

"I understand completely. Remember my kidnapping incident? Going alone without backup was my biggest tactical error," Ivy reminded me with hard-earned wisdom.

"You're absolutely right. I wasn't thinking like family. At least Vincenzo was ready to mount another rescue operation," I smiled at him gratefully.

"What can I say? Protecting beautiful women is apparently my calling," Vincenzo joked with characteristic charm.

Later, Xavier's housekeeper delivered a comprehensive file. My mother and Vincenzo examined the photographs carefully.

"That's definitely the same woman," Vincenzo confirmed. "Older and more artificially enhanced, but it's her. Still dresses like she's working the high-end escort circuit." He glanced at Dominic with amusement. "Good thing your taste in women evolved considerably. What a calculating predator."

"We all make regrettable choices in our youth," Dominic defended himself.

"Not me," Vincenzo boasted. "Brenda is beautiful, intelligent, and has impeccable judgment. I know how to choose quality."

"You got extraordinarily lucky, kid," Xavier laughed, clearly speaking from extensive experience.

Our moment of levity was shattered by Dominic's encrypted phone. His expression shifted as he listened to the caller with growing intensity.

"Understood. We'll be there soon, Daniel. Thank you for the advance warning." He ended the call and turned to me with grim purpose. "Detective Daniel needs us at the precinct immediately."

Chapter 382: Scout Hill Bloodbath

Daniel's POV

What started as a routine sweep through the narcotics operations on Scout Hill had escalated into a bloodbath. Three dealers down, two of my men wounded - all because these street rats couldn't follow simple orders to surrender. That punk Nick had been hiding in this cesspool, and I'd personally volunteered to lead this operation since one of our targets was connected to Thorne family business. We needed intel on this psychotic stalker who'd been terrorizing Gemma Valance.

The silver lining? No innocent blood spilled today. People love talking about collateral damage like it's inevitable, but I know the truth - every bullet finds its intended mark when you're disciplined enough. The nightmares come from the times when civilians get caught in crossfire. Today, at least, we kept it clean. One of Nick's crew ended up in a body bag during the firefight, but we managed to take the other two breathing.

Six fewer parasites bleeding this city dry. Progress in my book.

"Wrap it up, boys!" The tactical unit commander who'd provided backup approached as his men loaded the cuffed suspects into armored transport vehicles. "Inspector Martinez, looks like we've concluded today's festivities. The morgue wagon's collected their cargo, and the wounded are already en route to the hospital."

"We're done here, Commander, but the narcotics division will be pulling an all-nighter processing this mess," I replied, allowing myself a rare smile of satisfaction.

"No question about that. Unfortunately, my tactical teams will be tied up with evidence processing until the paperwork's complete. My officers are already running on empty after this operation," he sighed, wiping sweat from his brow.

I nodded in understanding as my encrypted phone started buzzing against my chest.

"Martinez here," I answered without glancing at the screen. "Dominic? You sound rattled." My entire body went rigid as Dominic's panicked voice explained that Gemma had gone to meet Nick alone, abandoning her security protocol. Reckless woman. "Breathe, Dominic. I'm still on site at Scout Hill. I'll have Adler run a trace on Nick's device immediately. I'll contact you the moment we have coordinates."

I immediately contacted Adler for the location ping, and to my complete shock, the target signal was originating right here on Scout Hill. Today might actually be the day we finally put this deranged stalker in the ground permanently.

"Commander!" I jogged over to his command vehicle. "I need backup for one additional arrest. Just discovered our primary target is somewhere in this area."

"Another guest for our detention facility," the commander stepped out, suddenly re-energized. "Although, is there a chance he's already among the suspects we've secured?"

"Possible. I don't have visual confirmation on him. Let me pull up his photograph." I contacted Adler, who transmitted an image to my secure phone. I displayed the screen to the commander, whose weathered face broke into an unexpected grin.

"Inspector Martinez, we won't need to climb back up that hill. That particular individual has already been collected today," he stated with complete confidence.

"He's secured in one of the transport vehicles?" I asked, thinking the timing seemed impossibly convenient.

"Not exactly. He's secured in the coroner's van," the commander responded without any hesitation.

"You're telling me he's dead? I need visual confirmation immediately." I approached the morgue transport driver. "Do you have positive identification on the bodies you've collected?"

"Absolutely, Inspector. Two were identified by their mothers on scene - heartbreaking situation. These young men choose this violent path, leaving their families to mourn the consequences." The driver shook his head with genuine sadness.

"And the third casualty?" I pressed, my impatience growing.

"Had identification documents in his jacket pocket." The driver retrieved a sealed evidence bag from inside the transport van. "Here's everything. These two mobile phones were also recovered from the body."

I examined the identification card meticulously - it belonged to Nick. The coincidence seemed absolutely impossible. I needed to see the corpse with my own eyes.

"Open the transport. I need to examine the body personally," I instructed firmly.

The driver complied without question, opening the rear doors, sliding out the metal drawer, and unzipping the black vinyl body bag.

I compared the lifeless face with the photograph on my phone multiple times. If someone had pitched this scenario as a movie plot, I would have called it unrealistic fiction. Yet here I stood, staring at undeniable evidence. We'd been hunting this dangerous stalker for weeks, and he happens to die in a tactical operation where we weren't even specifically targeting him? The timing was almost suspiciously perfect.

"Seal him up. You can transport him," I instructed the driver. The commander had been observing from several feet away.

"What are the mathematical odds of something like this occurring?" he marveled, clearly impressed by the bizarre coincidence.

"Astronomical, Commander. But nobody's going to shed tears over this particular scumbag," I remarked, clasping his hand in gratitude for the tactical unit's professional assistance.

I drove back to the precinct without immediately contacting Dominic. I knew Gemma was secure - they'd located her before any dangerous meeting could take place. At headquarters, I briefed Adler on the situation, whose amazement matched my own bewilderment. Then I called Dominic, wanting Gemma to provide positive identification. With dangerous criminals like Nick, you never take chances or assume anything.

"Dominic, my friend, I have news that should put your mind at ease permanently," I began when he picked up.

"Daniel, seeing Gemma return safely is relief enough for me. She just arrived back at the office," Dominic replied, his voice noticeably steadier now. "Were you able to apprehend Nick?"

"Not exactly what you'd call an arrest. Nick is dead," I stated matter-of-factly before explaining the entire surreal situation. "That's the complete story - caught in our Scout Hill narcotics sweep and killed during the firefight. But I'd appreciate if you'd escort Gemma here to provide positive identification. This coincidence feels too convenient, and I want absolute certainty we're not declaring the wrong man deceased."

"Understood completely. We're departing now. Thank you, Daniel." After we disconnected, I looked across at Adler seated at his desk.

"Adler, didn't the surveillance unit monitoring Nick report his movements according to protocol?" I asked, recalling our explicit standing orders - if Nick moved from his location, they were to notify us immediately and maintain visual contact.

"Negative," Adler glanced at his ringing phone and shot me a knowing look. "And speaking of suspicious timing - it's them calling now." He answered on speaker mode, maintaining direct eye contact with me. "Go ahead, Detective Pace."

"Inspector Martinez, the target just exited his apartment building. We attempted pursuit but lost visual - he entered a vehicle and fled at high speed. Lost him in downtown traffic," Detective Pace reported, the deception painfully transparent in his voice.

"How extremely unfortunate," Adler replied, feigning professional disappointment. "Return to headquarters immediately so we can coordinate a strategy to locate him."

"Sir, wouldn't it be more tactically sound to maintain our surveillance position? There's a possibility he might return to his residence," Detective Pace pressed, clearly stalling.

"Negative, Detective Pace. Report to headquarters immediately. I seriously doubt he'll be returning to that location," Adler insisted with unmistakable authority.

"Yes, Inspector. You're in command," Pace conceded reluctantly before terminating the call.

"Those corrupt sons of bitches! They deliberately enabled his escape!" I slammed my fist down on the desk, fury coursing through my veins.

"Deeply disappointing behavior. Pace is a veteran officer - should definitely know better than this. I'll be filing a formal complaint with Internal Affairs immediately," Adler sighed heavily, shaking his head. "When they arrive for debriefing, we'll apply maximum pressure until someone breaks and tells us the truth."

Chapter 383: Facing the Dead

Gemma's POV

Relief flooded through me when I finally saw my mother was safe. The fact that Vincenzo had crossed paths with her seemed beyond coincidental—one of those inexplicable moments some attribute to luck and others to divine intervention. Whatever it was, I owed this kid yet again. After hearing their account of the mall incident, and Dominic confirming that the Nancy accompanying my mother was indeed his ex-girlfriend and a known associate of rival family operations, everything clicked into place.

Now we were headed to meet Daniel Martinez—my mother, Vincenzo, Dominic, and myself. All I wanted was to collapse in my own bed, but Daniel had requested our presence for the cleanup debrief, leaving us no choice in the matter. In the Thorne family's world, when their police contact called, you answered.

"Remind me again why Daniel needs us for this debrief?" I asked Dominic, still bitter about postponing my reunion with my pillow.

Dominic sighed, his jaw tightening slightly. "Gemma, you were Nick's target. The fake kidnapping was clearly designed to lure you to him. Plus, your mother's stolen phone was used in the scheme." His explanation remained consistent, but I sensed he was withholding something about how the family had handled the situation.

"I just want to go home," I whined, jutting my lower lip out.

"Gemma, stop behaving like a petulant child," my mother admonished, which made Dominic smile in amusement despite the gravity of our situation.

"Come on, aunt, don't ruin my excitement," Vincenzo piped up. "I've never been part of a family cleanup operation before."

Dominic groaned. "Good grief, Vincenzo! You shouldn't be thrilled about this kind of business. Your mother will have my head for involving you. I still can't believe I let you talk me into it."

"She won't blame you, uncle. Besides, I'm the hero who saved aunt Gemma—again. Inspector Daniel needs my firsthand account of how I tracked down those bastards," Vincenzo declared with unmistakable pride, which made me laugh despite my exhaustion.

Upon arrival at the downtown precinct, I noticed unusual activity—several unmarked vehicles and men in expensive suits who definitely weren't regular cops. We were immediately escorted to Daniel's office, where he awaited us with that familiar mix of authority and carefully controlled violence that marked all of Dominic's associates.

"There she is!" Daniel rose and embraced me, his grip firm and reassuring. "Woman, you're quite the trouble magnet."

"You're telling me," Dominic quipped, but there was genuine concern in his voice.

"Have a seat, everyone. I need to update you on how we handled the situation," Daniel said. After greeting each person individually, he settled back into his chair. "Gemma, after Vincenzo alerted Dominic about what was happening, Dominic contacted me with the details. We traced Nick's cell signal to Scout Kieran warehouse district. I happened to be there leading a coordinated sweep, and when we investigated, we discovered Nick among the suspects already in custody."

"So Nick was arrested?" I asked, hope rising in my chest.

Daniel spoke deliberately, weighing each word. "Gemma, there was an exchange of gunfire during the operation. Nick was killed during the confrontation."

"Dead?" I echoed, absorbing this bombshell as Daniel confirmed with a nod. "Does it make me a terrible person that I feel relieved?"

"Not at all, Gemma." Daniel offered a sympathetic smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "However, I'd like you to identify the body to verify it's truly him. We found his identification and matched the photo, but the family prefers certainty in these matters. You won't see any injuries—he'll appear peaceful, almost sleeping. Can you manage that?"

"Absolutely, Daniel. Just tell me when and where. I have no qualms about facing that corpse." Silently, I added that I wouldn't mind spitting on his face—he was surely burning in hell by now.

"Perfect. The medical examiner's facility is adjacent to us. I'll escort you there now," Daniel stood, straightening his jacket in a way that suggested he was armed.

We exited the precinct and entered the neighboring medical examiner's building. Daniel guided us through corridors that seemed unusually quiet, exchanging coded words with the coroner, who offered me a friendly but nervous smile. The man clearly knew who was paying his bills.

My mother remained outside with Vincenzo, who was visibly disappointed about being barred entry. His curiosity was insatiable as he pelted Daniel with endless questions about family operations. Teenagers could be bizarre, especially when they'd grown up around the Thorne organization!

I proceeded inside with Daniel and Dominic. The pungent odor of formaldehyde mingled with death assaulted my nostrils; the room was ice-cold and eerily quiet. The medical examiner directed me to a table where a body lay beneath a white sheet. I approached and glanced at Daniel.

"Whenever you're ready, Gemma," he encouraged gently, though his hand rested casually near his weapon.

Steeling myself, I lifted the sheet. There lay Nick, indeed appearing as if in peaceful slumber. No visible bullet wounds, just the pale stillness of death.

"Rot in hell, you monster!" The words escaped me involuntarily.

"Well, that certainly confirms it’s Nick," Daniel remarked with a hint of dark amusement.

"He was the embodiment of evil," I muttered, replacing the sheet over his face. "Thank you, doctor. Feel free to dissect him thoroughly—he wasn’t worth anything alive anyway." The doctor chuckled nervously at my dark humor.

"Let’s get you out of here before you request a scalpel to perform the autopsy yourself," Daniel joked as we exited, though I caught the meaningful look he exchanged with Dominic.

Back in the reception area, Vincenzo rushed toward me, bombarding me with questions about what I’d seen. We returned to Daniel’s office where he recorded our statements—though I suspected these were more for show than any real legal process. The Thorne family handled their own justice.

"Now we need to address Nancy’s involvement. She was deeply connected to rival family operations and assisted Nick. I apologize again about keeping your phone as evidence, Willow," Daniel added regretfully.

"Don’t fret, Daniel. I’ll purchase another tomorrow," my mother replied nonchalantly.

"Tomorrow? No way! We’re going directly to the mall after this to get you a new one," I insisted.

"And it’s my treat, Willow," Dominic added generously, already reaching for his wallet.

"Perfect timing for the mall visit—I’m famished!" Vincenzo interjected, causing everyone to laugh despite the day’s grim business.

"Vincenzo, your appetite is boundless. How do you stay so trim?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Auntie, I’m in my growth phase, plus I train constantly. Swimming, martial arts, weapons training. On weekends, Dad and I practice tactical driving together," Vincenzo explained, revealing his impressive and somewhat concerning activity schedule.

By nightfall, exhaustion had settled into my bones, but for the first time in what felt like forever, I experienced genuine relief and tranquility—Nick could never hurt me again, and the Thorne family’s protection ensured it.

Chapter 384: Best Laid Plans

Nancy’s POV

Everything was supposed to unfold like clockwork. Nick and I had orchestrated what should have been a flawless operation. He would handle neutralizing the Gemma problem while I concentrated on securing Dominic—my golden pathway into the Thorne family’s vast fortune.

I had meticulously selected an obscure shopping center in the outskirts for my rendezvous with Willow, calculating the minimal risk of her encountering anyone from her daughter’s dangerous new world. I spun her some fabricated tale about transportation difficulties and this particular mall being conveniently situated near my residence. The unsuspecting woman accepted every word without question, saving me the expense of hired transport or the humiliation of using public transit like common street trash.

When she arrived punctually, I executed the opening move of our scheme with practiced precision. "My phone died completely. Would you mind if I borrowed yours to contact my father?" I requested with carefully rehearsed vulnerability. Without the slightest hesitation, she handed over her unlocked device. I placed the call to Nick while she remained oblivious, then returned it casually to the table. Willow set it down before flagging a server—creating the perfect opportunity for what came next.

One of my brother’s soldiers had positioned himself strategically nearby. He executed a smooth walk-by, lifting the phone without Willow detecting the theft, then delivered it directly to our tech specialist waiting with Nick. With complete access to Willow’s communications, Nick could now send messages to Gemma while impersonating her mother. My sole responsibility was maintaining Willow’s distraction until Nick confirmed the target was secured.

We had planned every contingency with military precision. Nick and I had even purchased the cooperation of the police surveillance team monitoring my apartment building to temporarily abandon their posts. Nothing could possibly derail our operation.

Except for an unforeseen complication. That child materialized without warning—Vincenzo, bearing those unmistakable emerald eyes that mirrored both his mother's and his uncle Dominic's distinctive features. Though he had never encountered me previously, he studied my face with an intensity that made my skin crawl with unease.

The audacious little brat inserted himself directly into my conversation with Willow, and then disaster struck with devastating swiftness. He contacted Gemma immediately, delivering a warning before she could reach Nick's predetermined location. I had argued extensively with Nick about positioning himself closer to her workplace, but he insisted on maintaining his position near the hill compound for rapid extraction. His overconfidence had always been his weakness.

The moment Vincenzo made that crucial call, I recognized our entire operation had crumbled. While Willow and the child were momentarily distracted, I slipped away from the shopping center undetected. I immediately contacted Nick to deliver the catastrophic news, enduring his predictable explosion of rage and profanity. "Just vanish completely," I advised him firmly. "The authorities will be hunting you now." He informed me of his intention to retreat to the hill, stubbornly determined to locate another opportunity to capture Gemma.

Returning to my apartment, I contemplated seeking refuge at the hill compound for an extended period. That child had given me such a penetrating look—as though he could see through every carefully constructed lie I had told his grandmother. If he encountered my photograph anywhere, he might provide identification to the authorities. My strategic planning was interrupted by an urgent phone call.

"What is it, Stevie?" I answered, unable to conceal my irritation completely.

"Nancy, what exactly were you and the accountant attempting to accomplish?" My brother's voice carried dangerous undertones.

I understood better than to deceive Stevie under any circumstances. "He was supposed to acquire the woman and transport her to the hill compound today, but complications arose. I advised him to retreat there immediately."

"I already know what you did. My soldier reported everything. But you sent the accountant up there at the worst possible moment." Stevie's voice transformed to arctic coldness.

Dread settled in my stomach like a lead weight. "Why? What happened up there?"

"Federal agents were conducting a raid on the hill, there was an extensive firefight, and the accountant caught the worst of it. He and others won't be coming back down."

"Nick is dead?" Disbelief washed through me in waves. "What were federal agents doing at our compound?"

"They arrived to execute a search warrant. But my soldiers weren't about to permit them access without resistance. They opened fire, agents returned fire, and the accountant took his final breath. They also arrested several of my key personnel, including my operational manager. I require a new manager immediately and I only trust family. You're going up to the hill."

This wasn't a request requiring consideration—it was a direct command from family hierarchy.

I released a heavy sigh of resignation. "Understood. After today's disaster, I was already considering spending time up there anyway."

"Then it's decided. Get up there today and restore order to operations. I want everything running smoothly again. And don't even consider giving me problems—I know your obsession with money, but people will be monitoring you constantly up there."

"Don't worry. You know I value my life more than money." I assured him, earning a brief chuckle of acknowledgment.

After ending our conversation, I packed my belongings methodically, secured my apartment, and began the journey to the hill compound. I would be trapped there for an indefinite period. Though I despised that isolated place, defying Stevie wasn't a viable option. He compensated generously, and once he located someone trustworthy to replace me, I could resume hunting for another wealthy target.

I had accepted the harsh reality—Dominic was no longer achievable. With me confined to the hill compound, maintaining any pursuit was impossible. He possessed extraordinary wealth and undeniable attractiveness, but circumstances change. Better to adapt than waste time pursuing impossibilities.

However, one objective remained absolutely certain—I would systematically destroy Gemma's existence, for myself and as tribute to Nick. That incompetent fool had ruined everything we built, and revenge would serve as my consolation prize. I would orchestrate something so devastating she would never forget the consequences of crossing Nancy.

Chapter 385: Dawn After Violence

Dominic's POV

The first rays of dawn filtered through the reinforced windows of our penthouse bedroom, casting golden patterns across Gemma's sleeping form. After weeks of bloodshed and the volatile cleanup that followed yesterday's confrontation with the enemy associates, waking up with my queen safely in my arms felt like the only peace this violent world could offer.

My fingers traced lazy patterns across her dark skin, still unable to believe she belonged to me completely. She slept deeply, her head resting against my chest, one leg possessively wrapped around mine, her arm claiming my waist. Those full lips, soft as velvet, were slightly parted in sleep. Her long lashes created delicate shadows on her cheeks, while her wild curls spread like silk between us on the bulletproof sheets.

But Gemma's beauty transcended the physical. She possessed a strength that constantly amazed me, a spine of steel forged in the fires of our brutal world. Her fierce loyalty, combined with her capacity for unwavering love, made her extraordinary. She loved without reservation, ready to spill blood to protect those she cherished. In all my years ruling the streets, I'd never encountered a woman like her. Falling for Gemma wasn't a choice, it was destiny carved in violence and sealed in blood.

The miracle growing in her womb, our future heir, was living proof of our unbreakable bond. Soon, we'd hold this tiny successor to our empire. The thought that I had helped create the next generation of our bloodline filled me with fierce pride.

My fears of becoming like Marcus, that pathetic excuse for a father who betrayed everything sacred, had vanished completely. Even before meeting our child, I already loved this little warrior with a ferocity that could level cities. This love was different from anything else, deeper than the loyalty of my soldiers,

more absolute than my devotion to the family. I would burn down entire territories to ensure our baby's safety, giving everything to be the father they deserved.

"What's behind that dangerous smile so early, my handsome killer?" Gemma's sleepy voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"Just appreciating the perfection that is my queen, and thinking about how eager I am to meet our little heir." I leaned down, claiming her lips in a possessive kiss. "Good morning, Songbird."

She smiled against my mouth. "Mmm, good morning to you too, Capo Frost. Though we still have time before our baby arrives."

"But soon we'll have the ultrasound," I reminded her, excitement bleeding through my carefully controlled demeanor. "We'll hear their heartbeat and get our first glimpse." Caleb's joy during this milestone with Ivy had been infectious, and I craved experiencing it myself.

"Yes, right after we return from our honeymoon," she replied, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Time away from territories and bloodshed, just for us. Sounds like paradise." I shifted, positioning myself above her with predatory grace. "Perhaps we should practice making the most of our private time."

Gemma laughed, that melodic sound that could calm my violent impulses, as she wrapped her legs around my waist. "Lucky for us, we have time before you need to check in with your soldiers to perfect our technique."

Her kiss ignited something primal within me, her mouth hot and demanding against mine. "I need you," I whispered against her lips, savoring their softness like a man addicted to the finest vice.

Her hands explored my battle-scarred body with purpose, her nails leaving delicious trails along my back. Each touch stoked the fire building between us. Her kisses left me breathless, craving more of her essence, her taste, her everything.

I loved the sensation of her silken skin beneath my calloused fingers, and the soft moans she made when I touched her most sensitive places. She was always so responsive, so ready for me, her desire matching my own hunger with equal intensity.

When I finally entered her, the sensation nearly shattered my control. She was warm, welcoming, and perfect, her hips moving in ways that threatened to end our encounter before it truly began.

In one fluid movement, I flipped us, positioning Gemma above me like the queen she was born to be. I guided her as she straddled my body, taking command in the most intoxicating way. Watching her like this, ruling both our pleasure with absolute authority, was a sight that owned me completely. She commanded me utterly in these moments, and I surrendered willingly to her power.

Her movements grew more urgent as she rode me, her perfect body taking me deeper with each roll of her hips. I reached up to cup her breasts, massaging the soft flesh and teasing her nipples between my fingers, drawing louder moans from those beautiful lips.

Unable to resist her closeness, I sat up, keeping her firmly anchored in my lap. I held her waist as I claimed her mouth in a consuming kiss, our tongues battling in perfect harmony. Gemma continued grinding against me, creating friction that threatened to drive me beyond reason.

My mouth traveled down her neck, leaving a trail of kisses and gentle bites until I reached her breasts. They were soft and full, their peaks hardened with arousal, an irresistible invitation. I lost myself in their perfection, worshipping each one, alternating between soft caresses and gentle attention that had her arching into my touch.

Supporting her hips with my hands, I devoted myself to her body as she moved against me. Her scent, her taste, the feel of her skin against mine, everything about her consumed me entirely.

Her moans grew louder, my name falling from her lips like a prayer as she approached her peak. The sensation of her inner muscles tightening around me pushed me toward the edge. She continued her movements, fast and deep, until she shattered in my arms, her release triggering my own powerful climax.

Making love to Gemma was transcendent, like claiming something divine in this world of violence and blood. We collapsed together, breathless and satisfied, our bodies slick with exertion. I gently pulled her down with me, cradling her against my chest as our heartbeats gradually returned to normal.

Chapter 386: Ghost Behind Glass

Gemma's POV

With Nick eliminated from the equation, life had taken on a wonderful lightness. Each day felt brighter, more vibrant, all because of Dominic—the Thorne family Capo who didn't just speak his devotion but demonstrated it constantly through his blood-sworn protection and unwavering loyalty.

Dominic made it his mission to ensure my safety and happiness, though honestly, his mere presence was enough. Falling asleep under the armed guard of his security detail and waking to those emerald eyes watching over me—it was the kind of sanctuary I'd never dared to imagine for myself in this dangerous world.

Our days had settled into a pattern of carefully orchestrated passion. Nights filled with intense lovemaking within the fortress walls of his compound, mornings beginning with tender intimacy before the harsh realities of mafia business called him away. His kisses, his touch, his fierce devotion—I was becoming thoroughly addicted to them all.

The family's legitimate businesses had provided perfect cover for clearing my schedule of any pressing matters. By the end of the week, however, I was a complete nervous wreck about the upcoming ceremony. The classic bridal jitters had caught me off guard—something I never anticipated experiencing, especially since marriage had never featured prominently in my survival-focused life plans.

Perhaps my nervousness stemmed from finding the man who completed me in ways I hadn't known were possible. We would soon bind our lives together in the most sacred tradition of his world—exchanging blood oaths before the family soldiers and associates who mattered most. Whatever the reason, I couldn't quiet the anticipation coursing through my veins.

Zoe and Nadia had taken charge of organizing our inner circle for the coastal ceremony. That morning found us heading to the Thorne family's heavily fortified beach compound to oversee final security arrangements. The men would join us on the morning of the ceremony, just hours before our sunset blood-binding. I'll admit I sulked considerably at the thought of several days without Dominic's protective presence.

Zoe picked me up early that day in her armored SUV. When I climbed in, Lila and Audrey were already in full celebration mode—laughing, chattering, singing at the top of their lungs despite the armed escort trailing behind us. Their enthusiasm was both exhausting and infectious.

Upon arriving at the beach compound, we'd barely passed through the security checkpoint when trucks bearing wedding furnishings began rolling up under heavy guard. Watching Zoe and Nadia coordinate everything with military precision, you'd think they commanded their own private army—which, frankly, they did. Meanwhile, I found myself with absolutely nothing to do.

By the following afternoon, boredom had fully set in. Zoe and Nadia had handled every detail so efficiently that I felt completely superfluous. I sat by the pool inside the compound's walls, sulking slightly while armed sentries patrolled the perimeter.

"What's bothering you, Gemma?" Lila asked, settling beside me under the watchful eyes of our security detail.

"Everything's running so smoothly that I'm left with nothing to do. I'm dying of boredom," I complained, prompting Lila to burst into laughter.

"Don't worry about that, future Mrs. Frost," Zoe appeared behind me, startling me despite her deliberately audible approach. "I've got a list of items to collect from our contacts downtown. Would you mind handling it? Everything's arranged—just collect and transport back."

"Yes! Town expedition!" Audrey cheered.

"Count me in! Maybe we'll spot some interesting locals while we're there," Lila added with a mischievous laugh.

"Take my armored truck so you can bring everything back safely," Zoe said, dangling her keys toward Audrey, who grabbed them eagerly.

"Let's go, ladies! Adventure awaits!" Audrey pulled me along while Lila linked arms with both of us.

The small coastal town served as neutral territory—compact but offering everything wealthy tourists might desire. Immaculately maintained streets and buildings gave it a deceptively peaceful quality, though I knew Thorne family interests maintained subtle influence here.

After completing half our collection rounds, exhaustion set in—who knew retrieving pre-arranged packages could be so draining? We spotted a charming diner with tempting pastries displayed in the window and decided to refuel under the discrete watch of our security escort.

We'd barely settled into our booth when my encrypted phone rang. Seeing the caller ID, I couldn't help smiling as I answered.

"My dangerous man!" I answered, not hiding my excitement. "You can't imagine how much I miss your protection!"

"My lethal beauty, I think I can—I'm feeling exactly the same withdrawal," Dominic's voice carried that edge of possessive intensity that never failed to thrill me.

"I didn't even need to come early. Zoe and Nadia have everything under military control," I whined childishly, making him chuckle with dark amusement.

"Perhaps I have something to brighten your day," Dominic said, predatory satisfaction evident in his tone. "Look out the window." Confused but curious, I obeyed.

There he stood across the street, leaning against his bulletproof sedan, phone to his ear while his security team maintained strategic positions. I squealed and leaped up, racing outside to throw myself into his arms despite our bodyguards' immediate alert postures.

"My handsome!" I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him with all the longing of our brief separation.

"My goddess!" Dominic gripped my waist possessively, lifting me completely off the ground while his men formed a protective perimeter.

When we finally broke apart, we found ourselves standing breathless in the middle of the quiet street. His emerald eyes blazed with fierce joy as they locked with mine.

"I couldn’t survive another day without seeing you," Dominic confessed, thumb gently caressing my cheek while his other hand remained ready to draw his concealed weapon.

"I’m so glad you broke protocol," I beamed back.

"I’m here too, you know, Miss Gemma," Jude complained from the sidewalk, though his mock annoyance quickly dissolved into a grin. "Me and the whole crew of hopelessly devoted soldiers who can’t function without checking on their women."

I laughed at Jude’s theatrical disdain, momentarily distracted by his complaints about the other family men. The town maintained its peaceful facade with minimal civilian traffic, so I remained carelessly positioned in the street, listening to Jude describe the men’s "desperate" need to verify our safety. Dominic leaned against his armored vehicle, holding my hand while I faced Jude on the sidewalk.

I never saw the speeding car that suddenly barreled toward me at alarming velocity. I only heard Jude’s sharp warning before Dominic yanked me against him, clutching me tightly as he threw himself backward against his sedan.

In the next instant came the sickening sound of crushing metal and shattering glass. The vehicle that had nearly struck me had crashed violently into a tree just down the block. We rushed toward the wreckage with our security team, but as we approached the smoking remains, shock nearly stopped my heart cold.

Behind the spider-webbed windshield, I recognized a face that should have been impossible to see.

Chapter 387: Forgotten Hearts

Gemma’s POV

As we approached the mangled wreckage, my knees nearly buckled beneath me. The metallic stench of blood mixed with gasoline created a nauseating cocktail that made my stomach churn violently. I had to stop walking and take several deep breaths to keep from retching right there on the asphalt. Behind the wheel sat a nightmare - Beatrix, completely soaked in crimson, shards of windshield glass protruding from her skin like deadly confetti.

The crash told its own brutal story. Beatrix hadn't bothered with a seatbelt, and the violent impact had launched her body halfway through the spider-webbed windshield. Her torso draped grotesquely over the crumpled hood while her legs remained trapped inside the twisted metal cage that used to be her luxury sedan. Blood painted every surface in sight, and her agonized whimpers cut through the night air like a blade. We all knew better than to attempt moving her - one wrong shift could sever her spine or worse - but watching her suffer felt like torture itself.

Jude's urgent voice reached my ears as he barked orders into his phone, demanding immediate paramedic response to our location outside the Thorne family's protected harbor district. Dominic moved toward the wreckage with careful steps, his voice dropping to that low, soothing tone I recognized from our most intimate moments together.

"Stay still, Beatrix, the ambulance is coming," Dominic's words were steady and controlled as he crouched beside the demolished vehicle, bringing himself to her eye level. Her dark hair was matted with sticky blood, obscuring half her once-beautiful face.

"Dominic," she whispered through cracked lips, "it hurts so much, my darling. Promise me you'll stay close." Her voice barely registered above the sound of her labored breathing.

"Don't try to talk, Beatrix. Just focus on staying calm, alright?" Dominic's response carried genuine tenderness, his throat tightening with emotion as he gently covered her bloodied hand with his own where it lay sprawled across the destroyed hood.

The intimate exchange between them felt like a dagger twisting in my chest. Witnessing their connection unfold before my eyes was like watching my deepest fears manifest into reality. Something fundamental was shifting in the space between Dominic and me, and I could feel the ground beneath our relationship beginning to crumble.

When the emergency medical team finally arrived from Port Serenity's trauma center, they worked with surgical precision to extract Beatrix from the death trap her car had become. Throughout the entire delicate operation, Dominic never left her side, murmuring words of comfort and encouragement. Even

seeing her broken form on that stretcher made my heart ache despite our complicated history - her face and arms were painted crimson, and her exposed legs showed devastating trauma that might never fully heal.

"Dominic, you should accompany her to the hospital," I managed to suggest, though every word felt like swallowing ground glass. Part of me hoped he would refuse, that he would choose to stay with me instead of abandoning me in this moment when I felt most vulnerable. While leaving her to face this nightmare alone would be cruel beyond measure, I stood there feeling utterly forgotten, and not once during the entire ordeal had he even acknowledged my presence.

"I'll handle it, Dominic," Jude volunteered quickly, climbing into the back of the ambulance with practiced ease. "Don't worry about a thing. I'll contact her father immediately and make sure she gets the best surgeons money can buy. You two need to deal with the police investigation and get back to the safe house so Taylor can examine Gemma properly - she looks like she's about to collapse from shock."

The ambulance doors slammed shut with finality before the vehicle sped toward Port Serenity, the only city within reasonable distance equipped with the advanced medical facilities Beatrix's critical injuries demanded. Our small coastal town's hospital wasn't designed to handle this level of trauma. Dominic left me in the protective care of our female associates while he managed all the necessary formalities with the local police force - officers who were firmly in the Thorne family's pocket. After the destroyed vehicle was finally loaded onto a flatbed truck and hauled away, Dominic drove me back to our fortified beach house while the other women remained behind to complete Zoe's assigned security sweep of the area.

Upon our arrival at the compound, I remained trapped in a state of emotional shock. Beatrix's blood-soaked image had burned itself permanently into my memory, along with the expression of raw anguish that had consumed Dominic's features throughout the entire crisis. I hadn't spoken a single word since witnessing the accident, and I had absolutely no desire to communicate with anyone around me. Something volatile was building pressure inside my chest, threatening to explode.

"Zoe contacted me about the situation. Come here, Gemma, let me assess your condition properly." Taylor approached with gentle hands, guiding me toward the leather couch in our living area.

Our extended family and household staff crowded into the spacious room, their anxious faces hovering around me like concerned guards, but I could only focus on Dominic and the torment burning in his green eyes. I desperately tried to decode the emotions playing across his handsome features, but all I could perceive was his profound suffering for Beatrix and the emotional wall he seemed to be

constructing between us. This realization unleashed a hurricane of conflicting feelings within my already fragile state.

Taylor conducted his examination with professional thoroughness, pressing his stethoscope against my racing heart before repositioning the instrument on my rounded belly to monitor our unborn child. When he completed his assessment, someone pressed a warm teacup into my trembling hand while Taylor placed a small white pill in my other palm.

As I swallowed the medication with a careful sip of herbal tea, I observed Dominic pacing restlessly across the room like a caged predator. I returned the empty cup to whoever was sitting beside me without bothering to look - I couldn't tear my gaze away from Dominic's obvious distress. Rising slowly from the couch, I approached Ryder, who had been watching the entire scene unfold from his position near the fireplace.

"Can you take me home to my mother's house?" I asked quietly, finally allowing the tears I'd been holding back to spill down my cheeks in hot streams. His strong arms immediately enveloped me in a protective embrace.

"Easy there, sweetheart. Everything is going to work out just fine," Ryder murmured against my hair, his large hand stroking the length of my dark waves. Within the safety of his fatherly embrace, I felt momentarily secure from the chaos surrounding us.

"Please, I need to leave this place," I begged softly, pressing my face against the solid warmth of his chest.

"Listen to me carefully, you're extremely upset right now, which isn't healthy for my future grandchild," Ryder spoke with the gentle patience of someone addressing a wounded child. "Taylor just gave you something to help your body relax, so you should rest properly first. When you're feeling more stable, I'll take you wherever you need to go."

I nodded my agreement through my tears. Ryder helped me climb the stairs to the master bedroom, tucking me beneath the soft covers with the tender care of a devoted father before settling into the large armchair positioned at the foot of our bed. He maintained a comforting silence, simply keeping watch over me.

My thoughts spiraled into increasingly dark territory - Dominic was devastated over Beatrix's condition; perhaps this terrible accident had forced him to confront his true feelings for her, making him realize he'd been wasting precious time with me instead. He couldn't bring himself to look at me, speak to me, or offer any physical comfort, and this painful realization felt like invisible hands slowly strangling my heart.

I awakened several hours later in the middle of the night, feeling overheated, desperately hungry, and completely disoriented. Gradually, the memories of the evening's events came flooding back, bringing with them that same bitter taste in my mouth and the crushing weight of anxiety pressing against my ribcage. Though the bedroom was shrouded in darkness, I navigated toward the bathroom without bothering to turn on any lights, desperate for the cleansing ritual of a hot shower.

Inside the marble-tiled sanctuary, I peeled away my clothes and stepped beneath the rainfall showerhead, allowing the scalding water to cascade down my body, cooling my fever and washing away the salt tracks of my tears. I remained perfectly motionless for what felt like hours, my eyes closed, simply allowing myself to feel everything I'd been suppressing.

Eventually, the steady stream of water suddenly stopped flowing, but I kept my eyes tightly shut, thinking my exhausted mind might be playing tricks on me. Then I felt the soft texture of a luxurious towel being wrapped carefully around my naked body before I was lifted into someone's powerful arms. I finally opened my eyes, and there he was - Dominic, his green eyes filled with an emotion I couldn't quite identify in the dim lighting.

Chapter 388: Shadows of Doubt

Dominic's POV

When I returned to our secured bedroom, Gemma had already fallen into an uneasy sleep. I thanked Ryder for maintaining watch over her while I debriefed the rest of our crew about the afternoon's bloody chaos. Settling beside her, I observed the subtle rise and fall of her breathing until exhaustion finally claimed me. I awakened to darkness enveloping the room and an empty space where she should have been.

Alarm coursed through my veins as I bolted upright. I found her in the bathroom, standing motionless beneath the scalding shower spray, her body shaking uncontrollably with her eyes sealed shut. The sight made my chest constrict painfully. How long had she been torturing herself like this?

I immediately shut off the water and enveloped her trembling form in a thick towel. Only when I lifted her into my arms did her eyes flutter open, distant and glazed. I carried her back to our fortified bedroom, carefully dried every inch of her skin, and tucked her beneath the heavy blankets before sliding in beside her and drawing her against my body heat.

"What are you doing?" Her whisper was barely audible as she attempted to put distance between us.

I tightened my grip, my voice gentle yet immovable. "I'm protecting my woman."

"I'm not your woman," she replied, and I felt something cold settle deep in my chest. Something had been wrong since she'd ordered me to escort Beatrix to the emergency room, but I couldn't identify what had shattered between us.

"Yes, you are. I don't need a marriage certificate to know what lives in my heart," I declared, refusing to release my hold on her.

Then I felt them – warm tears dropping onto my bare chest. I reached for the lamp, bathing her face in light as I tilted her chin toward me.

"I intended to wait until morning, but I can't any longer. What's tearing through that beautiful mind of yours?" I asked, desperate to understand the source of her anguish.

Gemma sniffled, avoiding my gaze. "There's nothing to discuss, Dominic. I witnessed how you reacted when you saw Beatrix bleeding in that wreckage. I saw your devastation. Release me, please."

"No, I won't let you go," I insisted firmly. "Whatever twisted thoughts have infected your head, we're going to destroy them together. And until that happens, I'm not letting go of you."

Her body convulsed with fresh sobs, and I massaged soothing circles across her back until she could speak again.

"You realized you still love her," she managed between ragged breaths. "I saw it all. I witnessed your desperation."

I couldn’t comprehend what I was hearing. "Are you serious, Gemma? You’re this destroyed because you’re jealous of a deranged woman who nearly killed herself trying to murder you?" Disbelief and frustration sharpened my tone. "I don’t know what’s worse – your baseless jealousy or your lack of faith in my devotion to you."

"I saw it with my own eyes," she protested weakly.

"What exactly did you see?" I needed to understand her twisted perspective.

"I saw you terrified of losing her, gripping her hand like she was your lifeline. I watched you treat her with such tenderness. I witnessed your panic while coordinating with our corrupt cops. I was right there, Dominic, shoved aside while I observed your every gesture." Her tears continued streaming down her face.

"You’ve completely misunderstood everything, Gemma." The emotional barrier I’d been maintaining since the hit finally crumbled, and hot tears spilled down my face.

I sat upright, wiping my eyes roughly. When Gemma tried to escape, I maneuvered her onto my lap, positioning her legs on either side of me and gripping her waist firmly.

"Look into my eyes," I commanded, brushing away her tears. "There’s no confusion here. See what you missed before, and never doubt my love for you again." I held her gaze intensely. "What you witnessed was basic human decency toward someone in critical condition. I kept her conscious because her injuries were life-threatening. The entire scene was a bloodbath, Gemma, but not once was there love in my actions. I don’t love Beatrix. My heart belongs exclusively to you and our unborn child. From the moment that vehicle came speeding toward you, my only thought was that I could have lost you both. That’s what terrorized me."

I exhaled deeply and closed my eyes, fighting to control my turbulent emotions. When I opened them again, Gemma was studying my face with intense scrutiny.

"When I realized Beatrix was behind the wheel, I understood her intention immediately. She aimed that car directly at you, wanting to end your life before taking her own. But seeing her mangled condition, demanding answers would have been inhuman – and despite what our enemies believe, I’m not a

monster. I felt pity for how she'd destroyed herself with this obsession over me. I showed the basic humanity anyone would in that situation," I explained earnestly.

"Dominic, don't lie to me. I saw your panic when speaking with our people," she challenged.

"Of course you did. They showed me surveillance footage of Beatrix starting the engine and accelerating straight toward you. What you witnessed was my horror at nearly losing you and our child. You can't imagine the terror that consumed me." I tried desperately to make her understand, though her emotions remained raw.

I pulled her against my chest, holding her tightly. We remained locked together until her stomach growled audibly, bringing the smallest smile to my face.

"I think our child is demanding food," I whispered against her ear.

"His mother is too," she grumbled, still sulking.

"So that's why you're so emotional and irritable," I teased gently. "Let's remedy that. I'm confident once you're fed, you'll remember exactly how much I love you."

Gemma sighed heavily but didn't return my smile, which wounded me deeply. I couldn't bear her unhappiness.

"Do you want to go down to the kitchen, or should I have something brought up to our room?" I asked, still holding her securely.

"I'd like to go downstairs for a while," she replied with another weary sigh.

"Alright, let's get dressed and head down," I agreed, helping her to her feet, determined to restore the light to her eyes and eliminate every shadow of doubt from her mind.

Chapter 389: Seaside Healing

Gemma's POV

Dominic practically dragged me from the private bathroom of the Thorne family safe house, leaving me utterly bewildered as armed guards cleared the hallway ahead of us. My mind raced with confusion as I tried to process the bloodshed I had witnessed. Unable to contain my emotions any longer, I poured out everything that had shattered me during the hit attempt. Though he held me against his bulletproof vest and repeatedly swore his fear of losing me to rival families, I couldn't ignore one crucial fact—not once during the firefight had he checked if I was okay. How could I believe his desperation was genuinely for me when his Capo instincts had kicked in so ruthlessly?

The thought crept into my mind that perhaps Dominic kept me close solely out of obligation because of my pregnancy. After all, Caleb was planning to marry that scheming woman thinking she carried Thorne blood. Maybe Dominic shared the same sense of duty as his Don, bound by the family's codes regarding bloodlines and heirs.

God, I was so confused! My thoughts were a tangled mess of gunfire echoes and blood-stained memories, and I didn't know what to believe anymore. After eating under the watchful eyes of family soldiers, I stretched out on the reinforced living room couch and closed my eyes, desperate to sort through my chaotic thoughts. Dominic joined me, wrapping his scarred arms around me and refusing to let go despite my silent protests. He remained stubbornly attached to me, as if afraid the rival families might steal me away in the night.

As dawn approached through the bulletproof windows, I remembered a conversation with Nadia from weeks ago about how she had recovered from losing her first pregnancy during a territory war. She'd found healing by the protected coastline, and suddenly, I yearned for the same solace away from the constant threat of surveillance and retaliation.

Moving with careful stealth to avoid the motion sensors, I slipped past the sleeping guards and made my way through the secured grounds to the rocky outcrop where Nadia had shown me she used to sit watching the ocean beyond the family's coastal defenses. As I settled onto the cool surface, the sea breeze caressed my face, bringing with it the salty scent of water crashing against the fortified rocks below. The melodic sound of waves breaking on the private beach mingled with the morning calls of seabirds circling above the watchtowers. Night had almost completely surrendered to day, though the sun hadn't fully risen beyond the horizon where Thorne patrol boats maintained their vigilant rounds.

Peace gradually enveloped me—a tranquility that seemed to synchronize my body with the steady, soothing rhythm of the waves, so different from the staccato burst of automatic weapons that still echoed in my ears. As I sat there, something began to shift inside me. When the first rays of sunlight

crossed the sky and touched my skin, I felt the ice that had formed around my heart during yesterday's bloodbath slowly melting, replaced by a comforting warmth flowing through my veins.

Alone with the vast expanse of sea before me, protected by the family's invisible perimeter, I first wept for the violence I'd witnessed, then sighed deeply, releasing all my worries about rival hits and family obligations into the wind. Slowly, I felt my heart beating again—rhythmic, warm, restored. The moment the sun revealed itself in all its morning glory above the Thorne maritime territory, I felt renewed and ready to face whatever deadly games came next. It was precisely then that a steaming mug appeared before my eyes, carried by hands unmarked by the calluses of weapon handling.

"Coffee?" I inquired, reaching for the cup while scanning automatically for threats.

"Not today. Today it's hot chocolate because we need comfort, not more stimulants after last night's chaos," Nadia said, handing me the mug before settling beside me with the practiced ease of someone born into this dangerous world. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not," I smiled, still adjusting to having family allies in this brutal landscape. "I borrowed your sanctuary for a bit."

"It's magical, isn't it?" she asked with a knowing smile, her eyes scanning the horizon with the ingrained vigilance of a mafia daughter. "Even with all our security measures, this place still feels free."

"Completely!" I replied, still mesmerized by the expanse that seemed to stretch beyond the reach of family wars and blood debts.

"It's here for you whenever you need it," she said, gazing at the sea while unconsciously checking her concealed weapon. "Want to talk about what's happening inside you after yesterday's hit?"

"Are you willing to listen to a civilian's perspective on your family's world?" I asked, meeting her gentle but alert gaze.

"I'll always be here for you. You're like a sister to me now, and in our family, we protect our own," Nadia responded with the fierce loyalty characteristic of Thorne women.

"The love I feel for Dominic transcends anything I ever imagined could exist in this world of violence and vendettas. It's a connection that goes deeper than family codes," I began, hoping she'd understand my fears about navigating mafia relationships. "Yesterday, watching him handle that hit on Beatrix, I felt like I lost him to his Capo duties, like he couldn't see past his responsibilities to notice I needed him."

"Like being caught in crossfire," Nadia finished my thought perfectly, using terminology that resonated with our reality. "You know, Gemma, I believe in predestined bonds—loves that transcend family territories and blood feuds, people born to connect beyond the codes that govern our world. And I think you and Dominic share that connection because he feels exactly the same consuming devotion, that love that's waited through years of empty encounters with women like Beatrix."

"But Nadia," I complained, my voice carrying the frustration of an outsider trying to understand, "yesterday he focused entirely on neutralizing the threat. He didn't even ask if I was okay after nearly losing me to that psychotic woman's vendetta."

"Gemma, he knew you were safe. He shielded you from the gunfire, pulled you from the car's trajectory, and secured you immediately. As he said, he looked into your eyes and confirmed you were unharmed. But Beatrix wasn't," Nadia sighed, her expression reflecting years of witnessing family violence. "Before you entered Dominic's life, he lived by our family's casual rules—never forming permanent attachments to any woman, though he would occasionally use Beatrix for physical relief during territorial tensions. She constantly pursued him with the determination of someone seeking to climb our hierarchy, and he would end up sleeping with her during stressful periods, but he never misled her about his intentions or offered her any real position in his life."

"He told me about their arrangement. And she never accepted those boundaries," I said, meeting Nadia's understanding gaze that carried the wisdom of someone raised in this world.

"No, she never did," she agreed grimly. "Then you arrived and completely transformed Dominic—that's why I say he waited through years of meaningless encounters for you. After you, he never touched her again. I mean, after you caught them in that compromising situation—that was Shelton' manipulation and Dominic's moment of weakness. But that was the final time he was with her, and it happened so long ago in mafia time."

"Yeah, it feels like a different lifetime now."

"Beatrix has this dangerous obsession with Dominic that goes beyond normal attraction. I don't believe it was ever love—just a desperate woman's hunger to possess what represents power and status in our

world," Nadia explained with the clinical assessment skills taught to mafia daughters. "However, Dominic feels responsible for creating the monster she became. He thinks that because he used her for stress relief during family crises for years, she developed delusions of having a permanent place in his life, and yesterday's assassination attempt was her final desperate play. He feels guilty, Gemma—guilty that she's hospitalized and fighting for her life, and especially that she nearly killed you twice while targeting our family. Do you understand the weight he carries?"

"He thinks it's his fault she became unhinged enough to attempt murder?" I asked, still struggling with the moral complexities of this world.

"Exactly," Nadia smiled sadly. "That's the burden of being raised in our family—we're taught to take responsibility for the monsters our actions create."

"Your brother needs more than family counselors."

"He needs the woman he loves—and that's you, no one else. You're his anchor to something beyond the violence."

I breathed deeply, exhaling a heavy sigh while watching a Thorne patrol boat complete its circuit. After gazing at the sea for another moment, I turned back to Nadia.

"Do you think we can postpone the wedding until tomorrow?" I asked. "I don't want to get married today. After witnessing that bloodshed and nearly dying in Beatrix's revenge plot, I had a terrible night. I don't want my wedding day to have started with such violence and trauma."

"I'm sure the family can arrange the security adjustments. And I think it's the wisest decision given the circumstances. May I coordinate everything with our people?" Nadia asked with the organizational efficiency of someone trained in family operations.

"I'd be so grateful if you could handle the logistics, but please involve Zoe so our security coordinator doesn't have a breakdown," I smiled at her, appreciating how naturally she balanced warmth with deadly competence.

"That terrifying woman runs our intelligence network like a dictator," Nadia laughed, pulling me into a protective hug that conveyed both affection and the promise of family protection. "I'm thinking of installing reinforced seating here with sight lines to our perimeter. What do you think?"

"That would be brilliant, and my civilian instincts will thank you," I replied, joining in her laughter while marveling at how even moments of peace required strategic planning in this world.

Chapter 390: Hearts Reunite

Dominic's POV

The panic clawing at my chest grew stronger with each passing second. I woke to the rich aroma of imported Italian coffee drifting from the kitchen, only to find the leather couch beside me cold and empty. Gemma was gone. My heart hammered against my ribs as I bolted upright and rushed toward the kitchen, finding Nadia perched on a barstool by the bulletproof window, her sharp eyes studying me with the calculating intensity of a seasoned consigliere.

"Morning, little brother. How's the hangover treating you?" Nadia asked, her gaze penetrating as if she could dissect every thought racing through my mind.

"Like hell, absolute hell. Have you seen Gemma?" My voice cracked with desperation that would have embarrassed me in front of anyone else. The thought of her disappearing because of her fears about our dangerous world was eating me alive.

"I have." Nadia gestured toward the reinforced window with a subtle nod. "She's been out there for quite some time, sitting on the rocks."

"I need to go to her." I spun around, determined to head outside where Gemma sat facing the endless expanse of ocean beyond our heavily fortified compound.

"Like hell you are," Nadia commanded, her tone carrying the same authority she used when coordinating family operations. "Sit your ass down and drink your coffee. She needs space to process everything, and barging in like some desperate soldier won't help. Not one damn bit."

Reluctantly, I dropped into the chair as Nadia placed a steaming cup of black coffee before me. She filled two additional cups with something hot and exited the kitchen. Through the reinforced glass, I watched my sister approach Gemma, the two women engaging in what appeared to be an intense conversation. I strained to catch their words, desperate to eliminate whatever dark thoughts were consuming the woman I'd kill for.

"Sharing the sanctuary spot, I see," Quentin's voice startled me as he clapped my shoulder. I'd been so focused on surveillance that I hadn't heard the former Navy SEAL's approach.

"What?" I asked, confusion clouding my thoughts.

"That rock formation—it's Nadia's thinking spot. She goes there whenever family business gets too heavy. Says the ocean helps her strategize, clears her head for making tough decisions," Quentin explained, grabbing coffee and settling beside me. "She mentioned it to Gemma during our last family gathering."

"That makes sense now."

Quentin and I sat in tense silence, watching our women positioned on that rocky outcrop, gazing at the vast ocean that stretched beyond the reach of our enemies. After what felt like hours, they embraced, and Nadia began making her way back while Gemma remained seated. Nadia entered the kitchen, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze that carried years of shared blood and loyalty.

"Good morning, my love," she greeted Quentin with a kiss as he wrapped his muscular arms around her waist.

"Missed you," he murmured, holding her like she might vanish into the dangerous world that surrounded our family.

"I know," Nadia smiled with genuine warmth. "But family duties call."

"Why is she still out there?" I couldn't mask the impatience eating at me like acid.

"Because that spot has power, and she's finding her peace with the ocean," Nadia replied matter-of-factly. "Dominic, go shower and get your head right. She'll be in soon. Be the man she needs, not the panicked capo she's seen too much of lately. Everything's going to work out."

With a heavy exhale, I acknowledged the wisdom in her words. Gemma needed me to be her rock, her protector, not a desperate man drowning in his own paranoia and fear. I rose, kissed my sister's forehead in gratitude, and headed upstairs to the master suite.

Under the scalding spray of the oversized shower, I felt familiar hands encircle me from behind. Those precious hands I craved even during the briefest separations. I brought them to my lips, kissing them with reverent tenderness before turning to face her, pulling her against my chest.

"I missed you," I echoed Quentin's simple words—words that encompassed the bottomless need consuming me. Gemma's absence left a void in my chest that not even family loyalty could fill.

"I missed you too," she whispered, rising on her toes to brush her lips against mine—sweet, tender, reassuring as a promise of safety.

"Don't ever disappear on me again. A night without you nearly drove me insane," I confessed, clutching her tightly against me.

"Same here. But Nadia helped me see things from a different perspective," she admitted, her head resting against my chest where my heart hammered.

"Nadia?" I raised an eyebrow. "So my declarations of love, my fear of losing you, my telling you that you're my everything—none of that mattered?" I teased, earning a soft laugh that soothed my frayed nerves.

"It mattered more than you know. But I couldn't hear it through my own internal chaos. My emotions were too loud, too overwhelming," she explained, and I understood that feeling of drowning in your own thoughts.

Pulling back slightly, I searched her dark eyes. "Has the chaos settled?"

"Yes, it has." Her smile brightened her entire face, chasing away the shadows I'd put there.

"Then hear me now: I love you, Gemma. I've loved you since that first moment you stood up to me, and I'll love you until they put me in the ground." More than mere words, I was offering her my entire existence, my protection, my name.

"I love you too. The thought of losing you to this world terrified me. I'm sorry," she caressed my face with infinite tenderness.

"No apologies needed between us. I understand your fears. But promise me—no more shutting me out. I couldn't survive it," I pleaded with complete honesty.

"I promise."

I captured her lips in a kiss brimming with love and desperate need—the need to lose myself in her, to reconnect at the most primal level. Shutting off the water, I lifted her into my arms, caring nothing for the water dripping across expensive marble floors.

I carried her to our king-sized bed, laying her down with the reverence reserved for something sacred before joining her. Covering her body with mine, I kissed her deeply, pouring every emotion into the connection. Our lovemaking was unhurried yet passionate, each inch of her receiving my devoted worship. When I finally joined with her, moving slowly and savoring the perfect unity we created, words spilled from my lips instinctively.

"I love you, Gemma. Always and forever, until death."

I felt her tighten around me as pleasure claimed her completely, my name a breathless cry on her lips as she surrendered everything to me.

"Dominic, I love you." Her limbs wrapped around me, her words repeated like sacred vows, making me the most fortunate bastard alive and carrying me over the edge with her.

"I love you, Dominic."