Mafia Mask 391

Chapter 391: How Far Fallen

Dominic’s POV

Gemma and I lay face to face in bed, simply gazing at each other with contented smiles. In that moment, I needed nothing more from life—her presence alone fulfilled me completely. After our tumultuous day and night, we had worked through the chaos that nearly tore our world apart, reconnected on every level as both lovers and partners in this dangerous life, and declared our feelings without any room for doubt.

"As much as I hate to break this spell," I sighed, glancing at the clock, "we really should get up. You’ll need time to prepare for the wedding." Even in our world of blood and bullets, women still had their mysterious beauty rituals that made them chronically late for everything.

"No, we don’t," she replied with surprising serenity.

My heart nearly stopped. The thought of losing her again, especially now, sent ice through my veins. "Please tell me you didn’t cancel our wedding." I covered my face with my hands in desperation. "I swear I’ll drag you to the nearest priest and find any man of God willing to marry us if you did." I sat upright, ready to argue a case I refused to lose. In this business, second chances were rare.

To my confusion, she burst into laughter.

"My handsome," she said calmly, "I didn’t cancel anything—just postponed it until tomorrow. Nadia is coordinating everything with Zoe."

"Just postponed," I repeated, exhaling with relief. "But why?"

"Because I want our wedding day to start perfectly. Today definitely didn’t begin that way."

"You can say that again." The memory of nearly losing her to Beatrix’s murderous scheme still made my blood boil.

"But we should still get out of bed," she added with a meaningful look. "Your son and I are starving, and you know what happens when I get hungry."

"Oh no, let's hurry then. I can't handle another fury attack for quite some time." I scooped her up and carried her toward the bathroom, both of us laughing. In our line of work, maintaining some lightness was essential for survival.

I'd learned early in our relationship that two things made Gemma unbearable to be around—sleepiness and hunger. When either struck, she transformed into a grumpy, irritable version of herself. I'd made it my personal mission to prevent both conditions whenever humanly possible.

After showering and stealing several kisses, we felt ready to rejoin our extended family downstairs. Hand in hand, we descended the stairs. The moment we entered the living room, Xavier's voice boomed across the space.

"Here come the bride and grooom!" he announced with theatrical flair. Everyone erupted into applause and cheers. When the noise died down, Xavier, ever the bold one, asked what everyone was thinking: "So, lovebirds, problems solved? Will we be enjoying wedding cake and champagne after all?"

"Yes, Xavier, there will be cake and champagne," Gemma confirmed with a laugh.

"Excellent! That's literally the only reason I showed up," Xavier quipped, though we all knew he'd take a bullet for any of us without hesitation.

Gemma released my hand and moved toward Ryder, embracing him warmly. He returned the gesture with equal affection.

"Thank you for holding my hand when I was scared," she told him softly.

"That's what a father does, daughter." Ryder's voice trembled slightly. Though only her stepfather, his love for her was unmistakably paternal, and his acceptance into our dangerous world had been complete.

The front door suddenly burst open. "I’m here!" Jude announced dramatically. "What did I miss?"

"Just tons of drama with a happy ending," Xavier replied in his typical lighthearted manner.

"So nothing special then," Jude grinned. "But I’m absolutely famished."

"That makes two of us," Gemma said, smiling at him.

Nadia took charge, leading us to the kitchen where she served an incredible lunch. As we ate, I noticed Gemma watching me intently. I knew she was waiting for me to ask about Beatrix, but I refused to take the bait. After our reconciliation, I wouldn’t risk anything that might trigger another argument, especially about that poisonous snake.

"Aren’t you going to ask, Dominic?" Gemma finally broke, her expression serious.

Playing dumb seemed the safest strategy in this minefield.

"Ask what, my goddess?" I continued eating as if genuinely oblivious. She inhaled deeply.

"Coward!" she declared, causing Jude to burst into laughter. I maintained my innocent act. In this instance, I truly was being cowardly—unwilling to provide even the slightest reason for another dispute.

"My goddess, I honestly have no idea what you mean. Perhaps hunger is affecting your thinking. Let’s finish eating so you’ll feel better." I playfully placed a piece of bread in her mouth. Jude’s laughter intensified.

Throughout the meal, I felt Gemma’s gaze bouncing between Jude and me. Finally, after dessert, her patience evaporated.

"Oh, enough already! Jude, how is that disturbed woman doing?" she demanded.

Jude sighed. "Let’s move to the living room so I can tell everyone at once. Otherwise, I’ll spend the entire day repeating myself to different people." His serious tone suggested the news wasn’t positive.

When we entered the living room, everyone was already gathered there, creating the atmosphere of a war council waiting for intelligence reports. Jude took a seat and exhaled heavily.

"I know you’re all waiting, so here it is," he began, crossing his ankle over his knee. "Beatrix arrived at the hospital in critical condition with severe internal injuries requiring immediate surgery. The procedure was successful, and her prognosis is good, but she broke both legs, which also needed surgical realignment. The metal from the car tore through her legs, and according to the doctor, she’ll have extensive scarring on both. She also suffered major facial trauma—they had to reconstruct her jaw, and the windshield glass left a significant scar on one side of her face, with smaller ones scattered throughout."

"Will her face be deformed?" my mother asked, horrified.

"Yes. And honestly, from what I observed, it’s going to be severe," Jude replied, staring at the floor.

"How terrible," Nadia grimaced.

"It gets worse," Daniel added. "I was planning to wait until after the wedding to share this, but given everything that’s happened, I might as well tell you now."

"What is it, Daniel?" I asked, bracing myself for more bad news. In our world, bad news usually came in waves.

"We found the man who delivered both the poisoned chocolates here and the box containing the snake to Nadia’s house," Daniel explained. With Nick’s elimination, I’d almost forgotten about the chocolate incident.

"Who is he?" I asked eagerly.

"He’s a delivery worker initially hired through an app for the chocolates. He left his contact information with the client, who called him directly for the second delivery. He had no knowledge of what either package contained, but he identified the sender."

"Who was it?" Zoe asked with such enthusiasm that everyone turned to look at her. "What? This is better than any gangster movie finale. Should I make popcorn?"

Leave it to Zoe to find humor in the tensest moments, making everyone laugh despite the gravity of the situation.

"Beatrix sent them," Daniel finally revealed. "The arrest warrant has already been issued. Adler is heading to the hospital to serve it now. She’ll remain under guard during her recovery, and upon discharge, she’ll go directly to prison. She’s facing charges for ten attempted murders."

"Ten?" Gemma questioned, confused. I shared her bewilderment.

"Gemma, she sent poisoned chocolates that you thankfully didn’t eat, but six others did. Then she sent a venomous snake and tried to run you over. That’s six attempts with the chocolates, plus two more against you personally, and two against your baby," Daniel clarified, and understanding dawned on Gemma’s face.

"How far she’s fallen," I lamented, thinking of Beatrix’s descent into such obsessive behavior that she couldn’t recognize the monstrosity of her actions. She had chosen to betray not just me, but our entire organization’s code of honor, and would now face the consequences of her choices.

Chapter 392: Unwanted Wedding Guest

Gemma’s POV

The afternoon sun streamed through the bulletproof windows of the Thorne family’s safe house, where I sat with my mother and grandmother in the heavily secured living room, dissecting the emotional chaos of recent days. They listened with the patience that came from years of life experience, offering wisdom about my recent behavior.

"If you had simply confronted Dominic directly instead of letting paranoia consume you, you could have spared yourself all that anguish," my mother said, her tone gentle but sharp. She understood the weight of suspicion in our world, where trust was a luxury few could afford.

Grandmother reached for my hand, her fingers bearing the scars of a life lived in the shadows. "Darling, marriage in our world requires absolute trust above all else. If you enter this union without truly believing in him, the foundation will crumble under the first sign of betrayal. Take it from someone who's been there."

"I swear I won't let my imagination run wild again," I admitted, feeling heat creep up my neck as I acknowledged my tendency toward rash conclusions in this paranoid underworld.

"Ladies!" Dominic's voice echoed through the reinforced hallway as he approached, flanked by two armed bodyguards who melted away at his gesture. His smile could have melted steel as he extended his hand toward me. "May I steal this beautiful woman for a while?"

My mother's face lit up with approval. "She's your responsibility now, thank God. I'm relieved you're the one dealing with her dramatic episodes these days instead of me."

"Mom! I am not dramatic!" I protested, which only made her laugh harder.

Grandmother's eyes sparkled with mischief behind her designer glasses. "Sometimes you absolutely are, dear child."

Dominic and my mother exchanged knowing looks, both clearly entertained by my indignation.

"Come on, my gorgeous drama queen," Dominic murmured, pressing his lips to my temple and gently pulling my hand. "The private beach is waiting for us."

We walked along the shoreline of the family's secured coastal property, wrapped in each other's arms while discussing our future plans. The conversation flowed easily between us as we mapped out our life after the wedding ceremony, always mindful of the armed guards maintaining a respectful distance around the perimeter.

A while later, we returned to the compound laughing, but my smile died instantly when I saw who waited in the main parlor. My blood turned to ice. There he sat, surrounded by his parasitic entourage—the two women I despised most in this world—wearing that entitled expression that suggested he owned everything within sight.

Dominic felt the change in me immediately, confusion darkening his features as he registered my hardening expression. What was my biological father doing here? And those leeches he called family? How had he even discovered the wedding location? My eyes darted to my mother, who subtly shook her head, confirming she hadn't revealed anything.

"Ah, there's my precious daughter!" my father announced, rising from the leather chair and approaching me with open arms. I instinctively stepped backward.

"I'm not your daughter," I replied, ice coating every word.

His wife—the gold-digging replacement who'd happily played mother while he abandoned his real family—fixed me with a contemptuous stare. "Gemma, what kind of disrespect is this? Show your father proper courtesy."

"Why are you here?" I demanded, staring directly at the stranger who shared my DNA but nothing else of substance.

He might be my biological father, but he'd forfeited any claim to paternal rights long ago through consistent abandonment and neglect. This man was nothing to me because he'd chosen to be nothing in my life. His sudden appearance made absolutely no sense.

"Gemma, you're getting married," he said, as if explaining something painfully obvious. "I'm your father—I'm here to walk you down the aisle. Even though I never received an invitation, which I'm certain was your mother's vindictive doing."

"Leave my mother out of this conversation," I snapped. "The invitation wasn't sent because I didn't want you here. You're not my father in any meaningful way. Wait for your wife's daughter to marry and walk her down the aisle instead."

The familiar pattern was emerging—he only remembered his paternal obligations when it served his purposes, usually when he could simultaneously wound my mother or gain something valuable for himself.

"Gemma, there's no reason to be jealous of your sister. My heart has enough room for both of you," he said with practiced gentleness, performing for the audience.

"Don't be absurd. She's not my sister, and she's not even your biological daughter. And even if she were, you stopped being my father long ago," I stated firmly. "Now leave. Go back wherever you crawled from and stay out of my life, as I've repeatedly told you."

"Gemma, sweetheart, release this bitterness," he persisted, unnaturally determined. "I was absolutely thrilled hearing about your wedding!"

"Really?" My skepticism couldn't have been more obvious. "And exactly how did you learn about my wedding?"

"Well, imagine my surprise when I encountered Callie recently. She congratulated me because my daughter was marrying such an influential man." His fabricated story reeked of desperation. "You know how Callie gets—so excited that she accidentally mentioned the wedding was today. After that, I simply checked your social media and discovered the details. So here I am, ready to fulfill my paternal duty. It's not every day my daughter marries someone of your fiancé's standing in the community."

"Oh yes, I know Callie well—the neighborhood busybody always inserting herself into everyone's business in grandmother's town," I replied sharply. "What I didn't realize is that you've become someone who stalks social media to spy on lives you chose to abandon. Who I marry is absolutely none of your business."

"Gemma, enough!" his wife interjected, stepping forward with righteous indignation. "Stop being so childish and ungrateful! We're family—accept it! I'm sure your fiancé doesn't approve of such behavior."

"If it were up to me, I'd have had security escort them out already," Dominic stated, his protective presence beside me sending warmth through my veins. "I've only refrained out of respect for Gemma, but say the word and they're gone."

"Dominic, I don’t know what lies Willow has fed you to turn you against us, but I’m confident we can clear up any misunderstandings," my father continued, his arrogance suffocating. "In fact, I believe we could become excellent friends and business partners. I have a company—"

"Ha! Right on schedule—here comes the con!" Zoe interrupted loudly. I noticed for the first time she was casually eating popcorn while observing the drama unfold from her position near the window. "Only idiots fall for this routine! Want me to handle this situation, Dominic?"

"Oh, crazy girl, I’d love to see your approach," Dominic replied with a dangerous smile directed at my father.

My patience shattered completely. "It’s painfully obvious you’re here to exploit my marriage to Dominic, but that’s never happening. Get out! Now!" I was ready to physically remove them myself if necessary.

Chapter 393: True Father Found

Gemma’s POV

My hands were trembling with barely contained fury as I watched these parasites contaminate our family sanctuary, but when Molly decided to cross the line and provoke me directly, every ounce of self-control I possessed evaporated.

"Stop putting on this pathetic performance, you clumsy wreck! You’ve always been desperate for the spotlight. How embarrassing! Why don’t you introduce your criminal boyfriend and his mafia associates to your real family?" Molly sneered, using that vicious nickname she’d tormented me with for years. "Look, Dominic, there’s still time to escape this disaster because you’re clearly with the wrong sister."

When she had the audacity to approach Dominic and place her skeletal fingers against his chest, something lethal ignited in my veins. My blood turned to liquid fire as murderous rage consumed me. Without a second’s hesitation, I lunged forward and seized Molly by her bleached hair, showing absolutely no restraint.

"Zoe, I need you now," I called to my partner in crime, who eagerly passed her snacks to Finn and rushed to join the violence.

When Daphne, Terrence’s pathetic wife, charged toward me, Zoe intercepted her with military precision, grabbing a fistful of her dyed hair and yanking her backward with brutal force.

"Don’t even consider it, you decrepit snake!" Zoe snarled, tightening her grip. "Come on, Gemma, let’s show these two what the street tastes like!"

"Allow me to handle the gentleman," Ryder announced, his voice carrying the cold authority of someone accustomed to violence.

We hauled both women outside by their hair and dumped them onto the concrete without ceremony. Ryder followed closely behind, roughly shoving Terrence along with us like the worthless trash he was.

"You’re completely unhinged! Look what you’ve done to my designer dress, Gemma!" Molly whined, frantically brushing dirt from her ruined outfit.

"Look what you’ve done, Molly—you were born into this world! Go straight to hell! And learn to never contaminate my presence again." My stress was reaching dangerous levels, which could threaten my unborn child.

I turned to watch Ryder forcefully ejecting Terrence onto the pavement. Ryder despised Terrence with the same intensity I did. Though Terrence was my biological sperm donor, he had never fulfilled the role of a father, constantly abusing my mother and bleeding our family dry. I had permanently severed him from my life years ago.

I was absolutely certain he only materialized at my wedding to antagonize my mother and exploit my connection to Dominic’s crime family. His failing security front was hemorrhaging money, and he undoubtedly viewed Dominic as his golden ticket to easy cash. But I would die before allowing that to happen.

"I’m warning you for the final time," I said, stepping toward him with ice-cold determination burning in my eyes. "Vanish from my existence and drag your worthless household with you. You are nothing to me. And as you well know, I had your name legally erased from my birth certificate years ago."

"Gemma, darling, don’t be so harsh," Terrence pleaded with transparent desperation.

"Spare me the performance! Removing your name from my legal documents wasn't clear enough? Do I need to obtain a restraining order to keep your toxic presence away from me? Because I will, and I'll have you thrown behind bars if you violate it!" I felt revulsion rising in my throat as I spoke.

"Fine, Gemma. Message completely understood. You won't be troubled by me again." Terrence straightened his wrinkled jacket and turned away, shuffling over to assist the two women who were still sprawled on the cold pavement.

Dominic wrapped his powerful arm around me as we returned inside. I felt completely depleted. What other disasters could possibly strike today? Actually, there was one crucial thing I needed to address immediately. I approached Ryder, who was protectively embracing my mother.

"Ryder," I called softly, feeling suddenly exposed and vulnerable. I had something vital to express—something I believed had been understood without words, but after today's chaos, needed to be explicitly declared.

"Yes, sweetheart?" He looked at me with his usual warmth, though slightly uncertain about my intentions. "I hope you're not angry that I intervened."

"But isn't that exactly what a father does? Intervenes to protect his daughter?" I asked hesitantly, and watched his weathered face illuminate with a brilliant smile.

"Yes, daughter, that's precisely what a father does. And I'll always shield you from harm, even after you're married into Dominic's world." He gazed at me with deep affection and gently cupped my face in his calloused palm.

"I never vocalized it because I always assumed it wasn't necessary—I thought you simply understood." My voice softened like an embarrassed child struggling to express profound emotions. "But you're the only genuine father I've ever known in this dangerous world. You know that you're my father, don't you?"

"Daughter, I've considered myself your father since the day I met you as a young girl, full of questions about life in our violent world, and watched you mature into this incredible, resilient woman who makes

me incredibly proud." Ryder's eyes glistened with raw emotion. "But hearing you acknowledge me as your father means everything, because I've thought of you as my daughter for so many years."

"You are my father, Ryder! I love you completely, and that's what truly matters—not some biological connection that means absolutely nothing to me. We forged our relationship on mutual respect and genuine care, and you've protected and supported me since you entered my dangerous life. What makes you my father is a bond that transcends blood and DNA. I'm eternally grateful to have you in my world!"

Ryder pulled me into a fierce embrace, and we wept together, our connection growing even more unbreakable. This was the man I respected and loved as my father—the one who had maintained vigil by my bedside when I was sick, who had driven me to countless teenage parties despite the risks, who had brought comfort food after my first heartbreak, who had cheered loudest at my graduation and been present for every significant milestone in my life.

"And I don't need to ask you..." I began, but he already knew my unspoken question.

"There's absolutely no possibility I won't walk you down the aisle tomorrow!" Ryder pressed my hands against his chest and kissed my forehead with tender devotion.

"Damn! If I keep crying like this, no makeup artist will be able to repair my face tomorrow," Zoe complained from across the room, making everyone laugh through their tears.

"I only have one question for you, Zoe," I said, still safely wrapped in Ryder's protective embrace. "Where did that container of snacks come from?"

"Girl, when that lowlife showed up and announced who he was, I sprinted to the kitchen. Gemma, your wedding is more entertaining than any crime drama I've ever watched!" Zoe replied enthusiastically, causing everyone who had been wiping away tears to burst into relieved laughter.

Chapter 394: Family Beyond Blood

Dominic's POV

The pregnancy had turned Gemma into a powder keg these past few days. Between Beatrix's assassination attempt and that ridiculous misunderstanding where she thought I harbored feelings for that venomous snake—absolutely laughable considering Beatrix was nothing but a weapon wielded by my enemies—Gemma had been riding an emotional rollercoaster. After a night of bloodshed and some time cleaning up loose ends, she'd finally found some semblance of peace.

I figured a walk along the private beach would settle her nerves. The gentle crash of waves and salt air had always been her sanctuary, away from the violence that defined our world. It worked like a charm—until we returned to find three unwanted parasites contaminating our living room like they belonged there. Her biological father, his pathetic wife, and that spoiled stepsister sat there with the audacity of honored guests when they were nothing more than bottom-feeders looking for scraps from our table. I felt Gemma's body turn to steel beneath my protective arm, every muscle coiled with pure hatred.

She'd told me enough stories about this worthless excuse for a man—a spineless coward who'd never acknowledged his blood and had actually pushed for termination when her mother carried her. The tales of his calculated cruelty, how he'd only surface to torture Willow for his own twisted satisfaction, had filled me with murderous rage long before I'd met him face to face.

As he spoke, revealing his transparent hunger for whatever financial benefits our union in the Thorne organization might provide, my contempt crystallized into something far more dangerous. I despised him for shattering Gemma's hard-won tranquility, for his pathetic opportunism, and for having the balls to show up with these two clueless bitches trailing behind him like accessories.

Gemma, fierce as the day I'd claimed her, refused to let these leeches sink their teeth in. With Zoe's razor-sharp tongue and Ryder's unwavering loyalty backing her up, she drew lines in blood-red ink, making it brutally clear that these parasites had no claim on her life and never would.

The moment that touched something primal in me came when she acknowledged Ryder as her true father. I'd always believed that real fatherhood was about loyalty and protection, not some accident of biology—it was about standing in the line of fire when the bullets started flying. Ryder had provided that shield while her biological father had offered nothing but abandonment.

To spare Gemma additional stress, my sister Nadia and Zoe had been working like demons all day to move our wedding ceremony to tomorrow. They'd contacted every family lieutenant, allied crew leader, and business associate personally, citing "urgent security concerns" to explain the date change. Despite this massive undertaking, they'd still managed to arrange a peaceful evening for us—a private beach gathering complete with a roaring bonfire, tropical flowers, soothing music, and light refreshments away from prying eyes and potential threats.

As darkness claimed the beach around us, Ryder approached with that serious expression that usually meant family business.

"Dominic, I need your help with something important," he said, his voice carrying an unusual note of vulnerability.

"Name it, Ryder," I replied, clasping his shoulder with genuine warmth.

His request blindsided me—not because it was strange, but because it was so perfectly right yet completely unexpected. He'd need my connections within the organization to make it happen.

"What do you think?" he asked, anxiety bleeding through his usual composure.

"I think it's fucking brilliant, but we'll need backup," I grinned. "Nadia! Get over here for a family meeting."

"What's going on, little brother?" Nadia embraced me as she joined us. "Ryder! What you and Gemma did today with those vultures—that was beautiful to watch."

"Gemma's got more heart than anyone in this cursed world," Ryder replied, his voice thick with paternal pride. "It's beyond my comprehension how that bastard could treat her like garbage."

"From everything I've witnessed, he's always seen her as beneath him," Nadia said with disgust. "But she has you—a man of honor in a world full of snakes—and that's what counts."

Ryder's weathered face lit up with fierce satisfaction at her words.

"That's exactly why I called you over," I explained. "We need to orchestrate something special for sunrise tomorrow."

"That fucking early?" Nadia questioned, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

"That early. It’s crucial," I insisted. "We’re going to frame tomorrow with moments she’ll never forget."

I laid out our strategy, and Nadia could barely contain her excitement, practically vibrating with anticipation.

"Keep it quiet," I warned, noticing Gemma blowing a kiss in my direction from across the beach. "We don’t want to blow the surprise."

"I won’t sleep a wink!" Nadia exclaimed. "Ryder, this is going to be absolutely perfect!"

"You really think she’ll approve?" Ryder asked, suddenly resembling a nervous kid rather than the steel-spined man who’d helped raise a mafia princess.

"Approve? Ryder, she’s going to lose her mind with happiness," I assured him, knowing with absolute certainty that Gemma would treasure his surprise. "I’m making a call to set everything in motion. Cover for me with the others."

As I walked toward the house, my phone already in hand, satisfaction warmed my chest. Tomorrow would be flawless—beginning with Ryder’s dawn surprise and culminating with our blood oath ceremony at sunset. After everything Gemma had survived in our violent world, she deserved nothing less than a day overflowing with love and family loyalty from first light to final darkness.

Chapter 395: Chosen as Daughter

Gemma’s POV

Exhaustion weighed heavily on me as I finally dragged myself toward bed. The family gathering that Zoe and Nadia had orchestrated at the Thorne safe house had been intense, but my body craved sleep. I left Dominic behind, still deep in conversation with the other Capos about territory expansion, clearly too engrossed in family business to retire.

After a hot shower and slipping into comfortable silk pajamas, I collapsed onto the mattress. Sleep claimed me instantly while muffled voices from the war room drifted through the reinforced walls. I was so deeply unconscious that I didn't register when Dominic eventually joined me in bed.

Which made his brilliant idea to wake me for a sunrise ceremony all the more jarring.

"Wake up, my goddess! Today's the day," Dominic whispered urgently, his muscular frame draped over mine as he peppered my face with kisses.

I groaned, "What's with this sudden obsession with dawn?"

"Please, today changes everything. Come on," he begged with the intensity of a soldier before battle.

"I'm exhausted," I protested weakly.

"You'll have plenty of time to rest after we handle family business," he countered, making me chuckle despite my fatigue.

I opened my eyes to study his face. "Are you absolutely certain about that?"

Dominic glanced toward the bulletproof windows with exaggerated thoughtfulness before admitting, "In our world, nothing's certain. But please get up—I promise this will be worth everything. I've already chosen your outfit."

Recognizing the steel determination beneath his playful tone, I surrendered. "Fine. I'll shower to wake myself up."

After freshening up, I emerged to find Dominic dressed in an expensive charcoal suit that screamed authority. On the bed lay an elegant navy dress with subtle silver threading that I didn't recognize.

"Where did this come from?" I asked, examining the sophisticated garment with its structured bodice and flowing skirt that commanded respect.

"I had it specially made for you," Dominic replied, his eyes burning with barely contained excitement. "Will you wear it for me?"

I recognized the telltale signs that Dominic was orchestrating something monumental—the controlled intensity, the predatory smile, the dangerous gleam in his emerald eyes. Deciding to trust him, I slipped into the dress and paired it with the designer heels he handed me.

Hand in hand, we descended the marble staircase as dawn approached. Through the mansion's reinforced glass doors, I spotted an ornate table on the private terrace overlooking the harbor, covered with pristine white linen. To my surprise, the entire Thorne inner circle was already assembled there, looking remarkably alert for such an early hour despite the late night of family business.

"What have you arranged, handsome? What's the surprise?" I asked, curiosity overtaking my lingering drowsiness.

Dominic gave me a mysterious smile. "Today's ceremony isn't my doing. I just helped coordinate security."

As we approached the gathering, everyone greeted us with knowing smiles despite the early hour. My attention was drawn to a distinguished gentleman in judicial robes sitting at a smaller table adorned with white roses and an open legal document. Before I could piece together what was happening, Ryder approached me with solemn ceremony. Dominic placed my hand in his and stepped back with military precision.

"What's going on?" I asked, thoroughly confused.

"Gemma," Ryder began, his voice carrying the weight of family authority, "from the moment we met in that dangerous neighborhood, I was captivated by that fierce girl who carried far too much responsibility on her young shoulders. I wasn't even involved with your mother yet—we were just allies in protecting you from street threats. When I introduced you to my son Zander, you two immediately bonded as siblings, constantly watching each other's backs in ways only family understands. My first wife had been killed in a rival family's attack just recently before, and you helped Zander survive that devastating loss. You would quietly stand guard while he grieved behind the compound walls, never asking questions, later pretending nothing had happened. You and your mother brought light back into

our blood-soaked world. I've always loved you like the daughter I never had—you were a blessing placed in my dangerous life, and I welcomed you with immeasurable joy."

Tears streamed down my face. Zander stepped closer, his arm wrapping protectively around my shoulder. We truly were siblings forged by violence and loyalty, and I loved him with my whole heart. Ryder's words touched something profound within my soul.

"You've been my daughter since our very first meeting—blood means nothing compared to loyalty. I tell everyone I have two children, but that the girl is both deadlier and more beautiful," Ryder said with dark humor, making me laugh through my tears. "Gemma, I'm incredibly proud of you and honored to have you in our family. But I'd like to make it official within our organization. Would you do me the honor of accepting my name and legally becoming my daughter in the eyes of both law and family?"

"What?" I whispered, stunned.

"Nothing would bring me greater joy than to officially recognize you as my blood. The judge is here for that purpose," Ryder explained with deadly seriousness. "I'm going to walk you down the aisle to your future husband later today, but I want to do it as officially your father. When I give you away to Dominic at the altar, I want you carrying my name and my protection."

Emotion overwhelmed me. Throughout my life, I'd been abandoned by the man who contributed to my DNA—a coward who only surfaced to cause pain. Yet without realizing it, someone had chosen me as their daughter, someone with no obligation who simply chose to love and protect me. Ryder was filling an enormous void in my heart, giving me something I'd always craved: acceptance and belonging in a world where family meant survival.

He embraced me, and we remained that way until my tears subsided. Zander stood beside us, his smile conveying his wholehearted approval of gaining an official sister.

"Come on, Beautiful, let's be family forever!" Zander grinned, and I couldn't help but laugh with pure affection.

"When I came of age, I removed my biological father from all documents because he brought nothing but danger into my life," I explained. "You all supported that decision. It was you, Ryder, who arranged everything exactly as I wanted, never questioning my choices, simply protecting me. In my heart, you've

been my father since you first eliminated the threats in my neighborhood when I was barely surviving alone. You taught me to fight back against anyone who tried to harm me. Nothing feels more right than having your name officially on my papers as my father—taking the place that's rightfully yours through blood spilled and loyalty earned."

"Daughter!" Ryder declared, kissing my hands as our family cheered around us with genuine emotion.

We approached the table where the judge shared thoughtful words about the true meaning of family in our world and the sacred value of chosen loyalty. His speech was brief but powerfully moving.

As the sun rose fully over the harbor, casting golden light over our protected territory, Ryder and I signed the legal documents. In that moment, I was reborn as Gemma Valance Shepherd, daughter of Ryder Shepherd and heir to his protection. For the first time in my life, I truly felt like a treasured daughter.

"Thank you, Dad," I said as I embraced Ryder, who was now overwhelmed with fierce pride. It was the first time I'd called him Dad, and from that moment on, that's what he would be until my dying breath.

Chapter 396: Seaside Wedding Vows

Gemma's POV

The morning had been an emotional battlefield with my father, and after lunch, it was finally time to transform into a mafia bride. Nadia had expertly converted one of the many rooms in the heavily fortified Thorne compound into a bridal preparation suite where the makeup artist and hairdresser worked their magic on me and the girls.

Standing before the full-length mirror, I caught my breath at my reflection. My dress was everything I'd dreamed of – delicate embroidered tulle that resembled intricate lace, fitted perfectly to mid-thigh before gracefully flaring into a subtle mermaid silhouette. The V-neckline complemented the thin straps and open back that dipped to the middle of my spine. The nude lining beneath gave the gown a soft off-white appearance rather than stark white.

My hair was styled in an artfully disheveled low bun with loose curls framing one side of my face, adorned with white orchids that looked as though they were naturally growing there. On my feet were elegant white sandals with translucent crystals that caught the light with every movement.

Though everything else was understated elegance, I had insisted on carrying a bouquet of vibrant red roses – Dominic's signature gift to me throughout our turbulent courtship in this dangerous world.

The door opened, and my mother and Ryder entered, both visibly fighting tears. The sight of them – my two loving parents standing there, proud of the woman I'd become despite the blood-soaked path that brought us together – stirred something profound within me. My mother enveloped me in a long, emotional embrace, offering her final maternal advice before I transitioned from her daughter to the wife of a Thorne family Capo.

"Don't be a stubborn child!" she whispered earnestly.

I couldn't help laughing. Of all the wisdom she could impart on my wedding day in this world of violence and loyalty, she chose to address the one character flaw I'd maintained since childhood. I privately admitted to myself that my stubborn streak had indeed saved my life more than once in Dominic's dangerous territory, even if I'd never acknowledge it publicly.

When my mother stepped back, Ryder approached with a small velvet box. Inside was a gold chain with a heart-shaped locket. As I opened it, tears welled in my eyes at the engraved date and words: "God doesn't bring two people together without a purpose." The sentiment captured everything – a divine reminder that meeting Dominic wasn't mere coincidence, but perhaps fate intervening in the brutal chess game of our underworld. Ryder clasped it around my neck, and we embraced with a love that transcended the years we'd lost and the blood we'd survived.

My mother dabbed at her tears while the makeup artist quickly retouched my face. After a few photographs, she kissed me once more and departed to join the other family members in the secured perimeter.

"Now, I'll take you to your groom," Ryder said, his hands resting proudly on my shoulders. "You look stunning!"

"Thank you, dad!" The words flowed naturally, and his eyes immediately moistened.

"Don't cry..." I touched his cheek gently.

"When your child calls you mom for the first time, you'll understand this feeling," he said. "This joy mixed with pride and overflowing with love – that's what I've felt ever since you called me dad this morning." He kissed my hands reverently.

I was moved once again, finally understanding the gift of being a cherished, wanted, and anticipated daughter. This bond with Ryder was precious, and I silently vowed to nurture it carefully through whatever storms our family might face in this treacherous world.

A soft knock interrupted us as one of Dominic's security detail announced it was time. Ryder offered his arm, chest swelling with pride, and escorted me toward the private beach where our guests awaited under the watchful eyes of armed sentries positioned discretely throughout the property.

We traversed the perfectly manicured lawn where the reception would later take place under heavy security, and arrived at the shoreline. A white walkway stretched across the sand, flanked by delicate baby's breath in low vases and columns aligned with the chair backs. The white chairs with matching cushions created an ethereal scene that appeared plucked from a fairy tale, though I knew sharpshooters were positioned in the surrounding dunes.

The altar stood against the backdrop of the ocean, positioned perfectly to capture the sunset during our vows. A white-clothed table held two tall vases overflowing with baby's breath, while behind it, a pergola adorned with the same simple blooms completed the enchanted setting. The beauty masked the deadly serious nature of this union between two souls forged in fire and blood.

Dominic waited at the altar, impossibly handsome with his hair tousled by the ocean breeze. His light beige suit and pants complemented his crisp white shirt, and a single red rose adorned his lapel – our shared symbol of love that had survived assassination attempts and family betrayals. The moment I appeared at the aisle entrance, our eyes connected, and his perfect smile ignited something within me. The musical ensemble began playing "Love's Greeting" by Gerard Ellis, my chosen entrance piece.

From that moment, everyone else disappeared. There was only Dominic and me, with Ryder proudly guiding me toward my future. When we reached the altar, Dominic greeted my father, who kissed my forehead before placing my hand in Dominic's. My groom lifted my hand to his lips, sealing our reunion with a gentle kiss before we turned toward the altar where the sun and sea provided a breathtaking natural backdrop to our blood oath.

When the priest asked for the rings, Dominic squeezed my hand and gave me a mischievous smile that hinted at a surprise. The musicians shifted into "From This Moment On" by Stacy Farrell.

"Look behind you, Songbird," Dominic whispered, his expression boyish and excited.

I turned slowly to see my grandmother approaching, carrying a small boat adorned with baby's breath. Inside lay a cushion bearing our gleaming rings. This unexpected moment – seeing my beloved grandmother bringing forth the rings she had gifted us, walking fearlessly through this gathering of dangerous men – filled me with indescribable emotion.

"Gemma, Dominic, with these rings you'll become one," my grandmother said, her voice steady and sure. "This is the beginning of your life together, and I ask God to grant you the blessing of a happy marriage because you already have my blessing."

Dominic received the little boat, kissing her cheek gratefully, before she embraced me tightly and took her seat beside Ryder.

I looked at Dominic, silently thanking him for this perfect, meaningful surprise.

There on that piece of paradise, surrounded by those who truly loved us and would kill to protect us, we said yes to our future together. We pledged to support each other, to love unconditionally, to forgive freely, to embrace our differences, to overcome challenges, and to fight relentlessly for our household, our home, and our love – joining our separate paths into one shared journey through this dangerous but devoted life.

Chapter 397: Claiming His Bride

Dominic's POV

Gemma was absolutely breathtaking, standing before me at the altar of the heavily guarded cathedral. Every armed sentinel positioned throughout the pews faded into irrelevance as I found myself completely captivated by her radiance. The priest's Latin blessings and the justice of peace's formal words became distant background noise. Nothing in my violent world had ever commanded my attention like she did in this moment.

I had personally orchestrated for her grandmother to carry our rings down the aisle, and witnessing Gemma's emotional reaction confirmed it was the perfect tactical decision. The bond between those two women runs deeper than blood, and using her grandparents' rings to seal our mafia union made the gesture even more sacred. Watching her grandmother approach with those treasured symbols of our blood oath was exactly the touching moment I had envisioned.

When the priest pronounced us husband and wife under the protection of the Thorne family and gave me permission to kiss my bride, I couldn't suppress the victorious smile that spread across my face. I pulled my new wife close by her waist and claimed her lips in a kiss that conveyed every ounce of possessive love I felt for her, sealing our bond before God and the family.

The reception at the heavily fortified beachfront estate was elegant perfection. The manicured lawn had been transformed with round tables draped in pristine white linens, each adorned with flower arrangements that matched those from the ceremony. Wooden chairs surrounded each table, creating an atmosphere both sophisticated and comfortable, while discrete security teams maintained vigilant watch from the perimeter. A stage with a dance floor became the center of attention as Gemma and I shared our first dance as a married couple before taking turns dancing with our family members.

The endless procession of greetings and photographs with guests, many of whom were high-ranking family associates, began to wear on my patience. After enduring what felt like hours of diplomatic pleasantries, I needed a private moment with her, so I pulled Gemma away from the crowd of well-wishers and bodyguards.

"My goddess," I whispered against her neck, leaving a trail of kisses along her soft skin. "I'm dying to get you out of this dress." Her melodic laughter was music to my ears.

"Are you seriously trying to convince me to abandon our own reception?" she teased, though I detected genuine interest beneath her playful tone.

"Absolutely," I admitted without shame, continuing my campaign of persuasion with more deliberate kisses along her neck.

"What took you so long to ask?" Gemma's suddenly serious tone made me pause and study her face intently.

"I’m sorry, what?" I asked, genuinely confused by the shift in her demeanor.

"My handsome husband, I would have left right after the ceremony concluded. I’m desperate to discover what surprise you’ve arranged for our wedding night." Her eyes sparkled with anticipation and desire. "I just need to throw my bouquet first."

"What surprise?" I kept my expression deliberately neutral, watching her face fall with practiced amusement.

"Are you telling me that you, the undisputed master of grand romantic gestures, didn’t plan anything special for tonight?" She stepped back, hands planted firmly on her hips in a stance that reminded me why I fell for her fierce spirit.

"No!" I maintained my serious facade with effort. "Should I have?"

"You know what, Dominic? I’m staying at this party until dawn now," she declared before turning to storm off across the lawn.

I couldn’t hold back my satisfied smile as I watched her marching away in righteous indignation. My stubborn, beautiful wife had no idea what awaited her. When she was halfway across the manicured grass, I caught up to her, grabbed her arm, and in one swift motion that would have made my old combat instructors proud, hoisted her over my shoulder like a conquering warrior. Our guests, including several dangerous men who rarely smiled, erupted in genuine laughter as I carried her through the crowd.

She pounded her fists against my back in protest, but I held her securely, one hand firmly securing her legs against my chest while maintaining perfect balance.

"Dominic, put me down this instant," she demanded, her voice carrying both frustration and barely suppressed amusement.

"Not happening. We’re departing for our honeymoon immediately," I replied with mock authority.

"Dominic, I still need to throw the bouquet... Dominic... release me..." she continued her protests, though I noticed she wasn't struggling as hard as she could.

I turned toward where my lieutenant's wife Nadia and intelligence coordinator Zoe were stationed near the security checkpoint. "Where's the bouquet?"

Immediately, Zoe materialized with the floral arrangement and placed it in Gemma's hands, then turned to address our assembled guests with military precision.

"Ladies, attention please! The bride is throwing her bouquet! Anyone interested in participating better move quickly because the groom is clearly running out of patience!" Her announcement drew appreciative laughter from the guests as women hurriedly gathered in formation before us.

"Alright, Gemma, proceed with the toss," I instructed with feigned impatience.

She blinked in confusion. "Dominic, put me down so I can throw it properly."

"Absolutely not. Throw it now or it's accompanying us on our honeymoon." After a moment's hesitation, she sighed in resignation.

"Fine." She struggled to lift her upper body, using her free hand to brace herself against my back, and launched the bouquet into the air.

I watched with curious interest. Bouquet tosses at weddings always created mild tension among the single women, with participants sometimes engaging in surprisingly competitive behavior for the floral prize. However, something unexpected happened with Gemma's bouquet – it sailed cleanly through the air and remained completely intact upon landing.

"Who caught it?" Gemma asked eagerly from her position over my shoulder. "Let me see, Dominic!"

I observed the outcome with genuine curiosity, wondering if there was any validity to the old tradition claiming that whoever caught the bouquet would be the next to marry.

"Actually, I think 'received' describes it more accurately than 'caught' – it landed directly in someone's lap who wasn't even participating in the competition," I explained, still studying the amusing scene.

"Let me see!" Gemma demanded with growing impatience.

I pivoted so she could observe that the bouquet had landed squarely in my mother Bee's lap. She was seated at the family table beside Andrew, my mother's longtime companion, and they were sharing a meaningful smile that suggested the bouquet had revealed a secret understanding between them.

"Oh my God! That's absolutely perfect! Bee received my bouquet!" Gemma clapped excitedly, her earlier irritation completely forgotten in her delight.

"Now we're leaving. I want my honeymoon," I declared in my best possessive tone, making my bride laugh as I carried her away from our celebration and toward whatever private paradise I had prepared for us.

Chapter 398: Honeymoon Surprise

Gemma's POV

Dominic hoisted me over his shoulder like a prizefighter claiming victory, striding toward our armored getaway car with the swagger of a mafia capo who had just claimed his queen. Despite the lingering tension from the death threats we'd survived leading up to this day, I couldn't suppress my delighted laughter at my husband's possessive display. After weeks of dodging bullets and assassination attempts from rival families, the simple joy of laughing at Dominic's territorial antics felt like pure freedom.

Our wedding guests - a mix of Thorne family soldiers and trusted associates - erupted in cheers and applause, clearly entertained by their capo's caveman performance as he approached our heavily modified vehicle. When he finally set me down beside the bulletproof sedan, I burst into giggles at the sight before me. Despite the armored plating and tinted windows designed to repel sniper fire, someone had managed to decorate our escape vehicle in traditional newlywed fashion. A bold "Just Married" banner stretched across the reinforced bumper, accompanied by dozens of tin cans that would announce our departure despite our usual need for stealth. White tulle had been artfully wrapped around the vehicle's intimidating frame, topped with an elaborate arrangement of baby's breath that softened the car's menacing appearance.

Dominic helped me into the passenger seat, his movements still alert and protective even in this moment of celebration. After several triumphant honks that echoed through the marina district, we pulled away from our heavily guarded reception venue and into whatever future awaited the most dangerous couple in Port Serenity.

"Will you finally reveal where we're headed?" I asked, still completely uninformed about our honeymoon destination. All I knew was that we'd have precious time alone together, away from the constant surveillance and family obligations that dominated our lives. His secrecy had been so complete that he'd enlisted Zoe to pack my luggage without revealing a single detail.

"I prefer keeping it mysterious until we arrive," he replied with that satisfied smirk that made my heart race. "Though I'm amazed that Vincenzo managed to keep quiet about our plans for once."

"You entrusted Vincenzo with our honeymoon secrets?" I laughed, suddenly understanding your nephew's recent evasive behavior. "No wonder he's been avoiding me like I might interrogate him these past few days."

After several minutes of rattling cans and Dominic's careful navigation through the city's most secure routes, we arrived at an exclusive marina. My eyes widened with excitement as I began piecing together his elaborate surprise. The sight of luxury yachts bobbing gently in their protected berths made my pulse quicken with anticipation.

"We're taking to the water?" I asked, unable to contain my enthusiasm.

Dominic's eyes lit up with satisfaction at my obvious delight. "Since we only have limited time, and I intend to spend most of that time ravishing you in private, I thought cruising the protected coastline would be ideal." His voice dropped to that dangerous, seductive tone that never failed to make heat pool in my stomach. "What's your verdict?"

"It's absolutely magnificent!" I beamed at him.

"But Gemma," he warned, his expression growing serious despite the mischief dancing in his emerald eyes, "we'll have a full crew aboard this time. I want to focus entirely on you, not navigation or security. So no tiny bikinis where the staff can see you."

"You supervised my packing personally, Dominic!" I reminded him with mock outrage.

"Precisely why I'm issuing this warning," he replied with a dangerous wink. "Those scraps of fabric are reserved exclusively for my appreciation."

"What a possessive husband I've married," I teased, leaning into his solid warmth.

"You have absolutely no comprehension of how possessive," he murmured before helping me from the car and claiming my lips in a kiss that promised dark pleasures ahead.

When I finally looked around, my breath caught in my throat. The entire marina walkway had been blanketed in deep crimson rose petals, creating a luxurious carpet leading to our vessel. Antique maritime lanterns lined our path, casting warm golden light that guided us toward the yacht. The boat itself was adorned with more scattered petals and surrounded by dozens of heart-shaped red balloons floating on the gentle waves like fallen stars.

After boarding, Dominic introduced me to the carefully vetted crew members who would assist us during our voyage, then eagerly escorted me to the bow where he had orchestrated a breathtaking romantic tableau. A plush white blanket was spread across the polished deck, decorated with heart-shaped pillows embroidered with declarations of love in multiple languages. More rose petals created patterns across the soft fabric, while champagne chilled in an ice bucket beside a wicker basket containing artisanal cheeses, imported meats, and exotic fruits.

"I want to watch tomorrow's sunrise with you right here," Dominic whispered, his strong arms encircling my waist from behind. "But first, I'm going to remove that exquisite wedding gown from your body very, very slowly in our private suite."

Just when I believed he couldn't possibly be more romantic, he continued surprising me. We returned to the stern and entered through ornate doors leading to the luxury cabins. The entire corridor was carpeted with rose petals, while tiny heart-shaped balloons floated against the ceiling like captured dreams.

When we reached the master bedroom, I gasped in wonder. Dozens of red roses hung suspended from the ceiling by their stems alongside twinkling fairy lights, creating the magical illusion of an enchanted upside-down garden. Glittering silver and gold stars covered the floor, catching and reflecting light with

every movement. Each corner featured columns of miniature heart balloons stretching from floor to ceiling. An enormous basket overflowing with roses sat on the velvet sofa, while the bedside tables held champagne chilling on one side and a large crystal jar filled with Belgian chocolates on the other.

"I know alcohol isn't safe during pregnancy," Dominic murmured against my ear, his breath sending shivers down my spine, "so I arranged for alcohol-free sparkling wine."

Soft, romantic music began flowing through concealed speakers, and Dominic drew me into his arms for a slow, swaying dance. I melted against his powerful frame, once again amazed by his thoughtfulness and meticulous attention to every detail. We moved together in perfect synchronization, celebrating the unbreakable bond between us and the dangerous new life we were building together.

Eventually, Dominic's hands began exploring my body with reverent appreciation, as if memorizing every curve and angle. His touch was worshipful, his sighs filled with desire, but after several long moments, frustration crept across his handsome features.

"Where in hell is the zipper or fastening on this infernal dress?" he groaned, making me laugh despite the heat building between us. The hidden zipper he'd been searching for was cleverly concealed within the gown's intricate beadwork design.

Chapter 399: Penthouse Queen

Gemma's POV

I couldn't suppress my amusement watching Dominic struggle with my evening gown, his skilled hands that could disassemble weapons with deadly precision now fumbling helplessly against the intricate couture. Though I suspected this powerful Thorne family capo was deliberately prolonging his exploration of my body, I finally took mercy on him and lifted my left arm, indicating the concealed clasp hidden within the designer seam.

His emerald eyes sparked with that familiar predatory gleam as his lips curved into a victorious smirk. With calculated slowness, he drew the clasp downward, his intense gaze holding mine captive. Once freed, his warm palms found my shoulders, sliding the silk straps down my arms with reverent care. The expensive fabric whispered against my skin as it descended, pooling like liquid moonlight around my feet.

Dominic stepped back, his gaze devouring the sight of me standing before him in our heavily fortified penthouse. "My queen, you're the most exquisite woman in this entire blood-soaked city," he murmured, his voice thick with desire.

Though I'd heard similar declarations from this dangerous man countless times, tonight felt different. The worship in his eyes made me feel like royalty in his violent kingdom. He closed the distance between us, gathering me against his solid chest before laying me gently on our silk-draped bed. His body, still clothed in his tailored suit that concealed multiple weapons, pressed against my bare skin as his mouth claimed mine in a kiss that tasted of whiskey and danger.

His exploration was methodical and unhurried, like a man who owned all the time in the world because he controlled every street corner in this territory. His kisses mapped every curve of my body with the same precision he used to plan his family operations. He moved with deliberate intent, alternating between gentle bites and feather-soft caresses that left me trembling with need. When his attention focused on my breasts, I arched toward him instinctively, craving more of his touch.

His heated mouth closed over one sensitive peak, drawing it between his lips and pulling a deep sound of pleasure from my throat. The sensation of his tongue circling the hardened tip before moving to lavish identical attention on its twin was divine torment. He continued this exquisite assault, alternating between them until I was writhing beneath him, my skin burning wherever his mouth made contact.

"Dominic... please... I need..." The words dissolved into breathless moans as overwhelming sensation clouded my thoughts.

"What do you need, my queen?" His voice carried dark amusement as he trailed kisses down my stomach. With firm pressure, he guided me onto my stomach and began placing heated kisses along the curve of my lower back, intensifying my desperate hunger for him.

"I need you inside me," I managed to gasp against the pillow.

"I'm right here with you," he teased, his hands sliding down to remove my delicate undergarments with torturous slowness.

"Inside me, Dominic," I clarified, feeling his warm breath against my most intimate place as he pressed kisses to the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

"Let me see how much you need me." His fingers found my center, stroking my most sensitive spot with expert skill that drew a long moan from deep within me. "Yes... I can feel how badly you want me," he concluded before replacing his fingers with his tongue, simultaneously sliding multiple fingers deep inside me.

The dual sensation sent lightning through my body, drawing a cry from my lips. As he continued his sensual torment, I found myself moving against his mouth, unable to control my responses. My reactions seemed to awaken something primal in him - his groans vibrated against my flesh as he consumed me with increasing hunger. When my release finally crashed over me, he accepted everything I gave him, his tongue continuing its worship until the last wave subsided.

While I lay recovering my breath, still positioned on my stomach, I heard the rustle of expensive fabric as Dominic hastily shed his clothing. The mattress dipped as he positioned himself above me, his powerful frame covering mine.

"Lift yourself for me, my queen," he whispered, his voice rough with the same desperate need I'd felt moments before.

I complied, raising myself onto my knees while keeping my head nestled against the silk pillow. Dominic's hands steadied me as he adjusted my position. Gripping my hips possessively, he covered my body with his and entered me in one smooth thrust, reaching depths that made me gasp with pleasure. He remained perfectly still for several heartbeats. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw him with eyes closed, dark hair tousled, hands gripping my hips like he was fighting for control over his own fierce nature.

When he began to move, withdrawing almost completely before pushing back deep, the sensation was perfection. We quickly found our rhythm, his powerful movements meeting my backward motions as I pressed against him, reveling in our complete connection. Our pace increased, his fingers pressing into my flesh as he pulled me against him with growing urgency.

In the midst of our passionate intensity, he leaned forward, his chest pressing against my back as one hand slipped beneath me to find my already sensitized center. His skilled fingers worked the swollen flesh, sending me spiraling toward another peak. The dual stimulation of his fingers at my core while his hardness moved forcefully within me was overwhelming. I shattered around him, calling his name, my inner walls clenching rhythmically and drawing him even deeper.

"My queen, I can’t hold back anymore," Dominic groaned against my ear. Moments later, I felt him tense as his release pulsed inside me in powerful waves. His deep growl of completion echoed through our secured bedroom as he filled me completely.

Afterward, he carefully withdrew and collapsed beside me, our breathing gradually synchronizing in the quiet room. He pulled me into the protective circle of his arms, pressing a tender kiss to the top of my head.

"My queen, you’re absolutely incredible," he murmured against my hair.

I smiled against his chest, surrendering to the deep satisfaction of knowing we completed each other so perfectly - a mafia capo and his queen, bound by passion and blood oaths.

Chapter 400: Acid and Shield

Gemma’s POV

Our time sailing along the coastline with Dominic had been pure paradise. We explored hidden fishing villages under Thorne family protection, discovered secluded coves that served as family safe houses, and found private beaches where no rival families could reach us. We talked for hours about expanding the money laundering operations, made passionate love like newlyweds drunk on power, and laughed until our sides hurt—simply enjoying the freedom of being the wife of a feared Capo without constant death threats.

As we docked back at the family’s private marina, a part of me ached to stay on that yacht forever. The thought of returning to the dangerous reality of mafia politics felt like waking from a beautiful dream. But I reminded myself this wasn’t just an escape—Dominic and I had a lifetime ahead to rule our corner of the underworld together.

Back at Caleb’s legitimate front company seemed unusually quiet. I hadn’t seen any of the girls from our inner circle, which struck me as odd, but by lunchtime, they all appeared on my floor—Zoe and Nadia included—bouncing with curiosity and bubbling with excitement about the honeymoon details.

"Darlings, your favorite mafia princess has returned!" I called out jokingly as they approached my office.

Zoe, never one to hold back her sharp tongue, immediately chided me, "I can't believe you went through your entire honeymoon without even a single encrypted call to us!"

"If you must know," I teased with a wink, "my honeymoon technically lasted until I walked into this legitimate business front this morning."

"Judging by the ridiculous smile plastered on Dominic's face when he arrived at the money laundering office, I'd say that honeymoon is far from over," Zoe quipped, making everyone laugh. "Come on, let's grab lunch. We want all the juicy details about married life with a Capo."

Zoe's bold personality always made me laugh, though I knew she wouldn't rest until I'd shared everything about life as Dominic's wife. I grabbed my purse and joined them for lunch, feeling a newfound confidence. With neither Nick nor Marcus threatening me anymore, I finally felt free to embrace my position in the family hierarchy again.

After sharing honeymoon stories and showing countless photos of our yacht and the family's coastal properties, it was the girls' turn to update me on what I'd missed in the underworld.

"So tell me everything," I demanded. "What's happening with that backstabbing snake Beatrix?" Her self-inflicted accident hadn't changed my opinion of her treacherous nature.

"She's still hospitalized," Zoe replied seriously. "Handcuffed to the bed with federal agents guarding her room. Gemma, her injuries... they're permanent."

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

"The cuts were extremely deep when she crashed trying to kill you," Zoe explained. "They performed skin and bone grafts on her face, but she suffered significant muscle loss that left her permanently disfigured. Her leg is in similar condition. The scarring is... extensive. I almost felt sorry for her, despite her trying to murder a Capo's wife."

"How on earth do you know all these details?" I asked incredulously.

Nadia shook her head. "This lunatic dragged me to the hospital with her. Somehow she convinced our contact Inspector Adler to let us visit Beatrix. When we arrived, they were changing her bandages. It was truly horrific."

"Zoe, I can't believe you actually went there," I said, shocked by her boldness in visiting an enemy.

"I had to see her condition. After all, she nearly killed the wife of our Capo!" Zoe defended herself. "Despite everything, I felt bad seeing what she'd done to herself. I told her the war had gone too far and that she'd destroyed herself trying to hurt our family. And you know what she said?" I shook her head. "She said she didn't regret trying to eliminate you. I felt terrible for her mother, who's suffering through this nightmare with her daughter's vendetta. They're discharging her soon—straight to federal prison."

"How tragic," I sighed. "She truly brought this destruction upon herself by targeting our family."

After lunch, we said goodbye to Zoe and Nadia at the restaurant entrance. Ivy, Ruby, Lila and I walked back to the company building, chatting lightheartedly. Ivy was complaining about going crazy managing her five children along with Caleb, who behaved like another child when he was with the kids despite being a feared Don.

"Prepare yourself, Gemma," Ivy warned with a laugh. "Soon it'll be your turn to deal with endless crying and diaper changes while your husband runs the money laundering operations."

Just then, my phone rang. We were nearly at the building entrance, but I stopped to dig through my purse while the others continued ahead, leaving me a few steps behind. When I answered, a cold fear washed over me—I'd completely forgotten about her in our post-honeymoon bliss.

"Hello, dear little Gemma! Enjoyed your time with my man?" Nancy's voice dripped with icy sarcasm and barely contained rage.

"You should understand by now that he'll never be yours," I replied firmly, my voice carrying the authority of a Capo's wife.

"Maybe not. But after I'm done with you, he won't be yours either." Her tone was unmistakably threatening, the kind that preceded bloodshed in our world.

"Move on with your life, Nancy. Find another family to leech off of." I was losing patience—I couldn't handle another unhinged enemy threatening my position in the hierarchy.

"Oh, I'll move on—right after I get revenge for myself and for Nick. He was a fool, but he died because of you and your precious family."

"I had nothing to do with that street trash getting himself killed. Just leave me alone!"

"I can't do that. You're right in front of me."

I spun around and found Nancy standing directly behind me on the sidewalk. She removed her cap and sunglasses, smiling like a predator who had cornered its prey for the final kill.

"Hi, little princess." She stepped forward and, in one lightning-fast motion, flung liquid from a bottle straight at my face.

Everything happened in a blur. Hunter, Dominic's assigned bodyguard from the family's security detail, lunged in front of me with reflexes honed by years of protecting made men. He shielded me beneath his jacket that he spread wide like protective wings. Then came his agonized scream as the acid ate through fabric and flesh.

Chaos erupted on the street. Nancy was tackled to the ground by a plainclothes officer I'd never seen before, who produced handcuffs and secured her wrists behind her back with practiced efficiency. Hunter collapsed to his knees, desperately tearing off his jacket and shirt as the acid burned.

Within moments, the company entrance resembled a crime scene—police sirens wailed, an ambulance screeched to a halt. Nancy was forced into a police car while paramedics rushed to Hunter. Caleb, Xavier, and Jude materialized from nowhere, urgently pulling me inside the building and away from potential additional threats.

My vision began to darken around the edges as shock set in. My legs suddenly felt like they were made of water. The last thing I remembered was the feeling of falling before everything went black.