



# Mafia Don's Twisted Union

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** I've organized a million-dollar gala for a silver-fox Mafia boss, not knowing it's my wedding.

My best friend's father, Carlito Marcelli, hired me to plan an exclusive event.

Carlito's presence is magnetic—intense, brooding, and impossible to ignore. Beneath his sharp suits and quiet authority lies a dangerous bad boy with a heart I shouldn't want to claim. His dark gaze and deep voice make him irresistible, but he's completely off-limits.

On a whirlwind trip to Las Vegas, I lose my grip on professionalism and give in to the chemistry between us, letting him explore every inch of me. Then, at the gala, he doesn't just propose—he turns the event into an impromptu wedding. Overwhelmed and cornered, I say yes.

Now, as his wife, I've been thrust into a world of danger. After witnessing a brutal murder, I discover Carlito is a ruthless Mafia Don—and I'm carrying his heir

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Mia

The late afternoon sunlight floods Bianca's penthouse at the Waldorf Astoria, reflecting off the sleek marble floors and catching on the gold accents of the furniture. The space is a vision of modern luxury, as perfect and curated as the woman who owns it.

"Mia!" Bianca's voice carries from the hallway, light and melodic, as she steps into view. Her dark hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, and her fitted cream blazer looks like it walked off the pages of a fashion magazine.

"Bianca," I reply, feeling a smile creep onto my face despite the nerves twisting in my stomach.

She closes the distance between us in a few graceful strides and pulls me into a quick hug. Her perfume—something floral and expensive—lingers in the air as she steps back.

"I'm so glad you're here," she says, her smile genuine. "I've been dying to show you this place. Isn't it amazing?"

"It's stunning," I admit, glancing around again at the sweeping views of the Las Vegas Strip visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows. "It's very... you."

Bianca laughs, a light and easy sound. "Daddy insisted on the best, as usual. Come,

sit.”

She leads me to a plush white couch that looks like it belongs in an art gallery, gesturing for me to sit beside her. I place my portfolio on my lap, gripping it like a lifeline.

“So,” Bianca begins, leaning back with the kind of confidence that only she can pull off, “this gala. It’s going to be huge . And there’s no one else I trust to make it happen but you.”

My best friend’s words are warm and encouraging, but they don’t quite shake the weight of the moment. “You’re sure?” I ask cautiously, glancing down at the folder in my lap.

Bianca tilts her head, her smile softening. “Mia, you’ve planned events that people still talk about. That charity gala last spring? Genius. The vineyard wedding? Flawless. This is no different. You’ve got this.”

I nod slowly, trying to absorb her confidence. “You said this is for your father?”

Bianca’s expression shifts, her smile turning a little mischievous. “Yes. Daddy’s hosting it. And let me warn you, he’s not easy to impress. But once he sees what you can do? He’ll love you.”

Her mention of Carlito Marcelli sends a ripple of unease through me. His name carries weight, even outside of Las Vegas. From what little I know, he’s a powerhouse in business—a man whose presence demands attention.

“What’s he like?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

Bianca smirks. “Commanding. Intense. The kind of man who can walk into a room

and own it without saying a word. He's a perfectionist, Mia, but he respects talent. And you're the best."

I swallow hard, her words settling over me. No pressure.

Bianca smiles like it's all so simple, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "You'll be fine. Just keep your ideas sharp and your confidence sharper. Daddy respects people who can stand their ground."

"Easy for you to say," I mutter, but my tone is light.

She laughs, the sound bright and unbothered. "Come on, Mia. You've handled way worse clients than Daddy."

"Have I, though?" I raise an eyebrow, my voice tinged with teasing disbelief.

She rolls her eyes. "You planned a wedding where the bride insisted on live peacocks during the ceremony. If you survived that, you can handle this."

I chuckle despite myself, the memory of that chaotic day flickering in my mind. "Fair point," I admit, but the knot in my stomach doesn't fully unwind.

Bianca stands, her movements fluid and purposeful, and crosses to the glass coffee table. She picks up a folder, the Marcelli crest embossed in gold on the cover, and hands it to me.

"Here," she says, settling back into the couch as I take it. "The guest list, the initial budget, and a few notes from Daddy's assistant. It'll give you a sense of what you're working with."

I flip the folder open carefully, my eyes scanning the pages. The guest list alone is

intimidating—a who's who of influential figures from politics, business, and entertainment.

“This is serious,” I murmur, the weight of the task pressing a little heavier.

“Of course it's serious,” Bianca replies lightly, as if it's obvious. “But that's why I called you. Daddy doesn't trust just anyone with something this important.”

Her confidence in me is unwavering, but it only adds to the gravity of what's ahead. My fingers trace the edge of the folder as I take a steadying breath. “What's the vibe he's going for?”

“Elegant but not boring,” Bianca says immediately. “Sophisticated but not pretentious. And absolutely no glitter or neon.”

I snort at the last part. “Well, there go all my best ideas.”

She laughs, and for a moment, the tension in the room eases. “You're ridiculous,” she says, shaking her head. “But seriously, just keep it classy. Daddy's all about appearances, and this gala is as much about his image as it is about celebrating his success.”

I nod, scribbling notes in my planner as my mind starts piecing together ideas. Themes, color palettes, potential venues—they all swirl in my head, competing for attention.

Bianca leans forward, her expression softening. “You've got this, Mia. I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't believe that.”

“Thanks,” I say quietly, meaning it.

Her phone buzzes on the coffee table, breaking the moment. She glances at the screen and sighs. “I’ve got a meeting downtown, but stay as long as you need. Go through the folder, take notes, whatever. Just text me if you need anything.”

I nod, clutching the folder like a lifeline.

As she grabs her purse and heads toward the door, she pauses to look back. “Oh, and Daddy’s assistant will confirm your first meeting with him soon. Don’t overthink it—you’ll be great.”

The door clicks shut behind her, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I exhale slowly, sinking back into the plush white couch. The late afternoon sunlight spills across the room, highlighting the gold accents of the penthouse. It’s beautiful, sure, but also a little overwhelming—like everything in Bianca’s world.

I open the folder again, flipping through the pages carefully. Each detail feels heavier than the last: an exhaustive guest list of power players, notes on logistics, and the faint outline of a timeline. There’s something almost surgical about the precision in these documents.

The name at the top of every page—Carlito Marcelli—stands out like a flashing neon sign in my mind. Bianca talks about him like he’s larger than life, and I can’t deny that the name carries an almost mythical weight. A commanding presence, she’d said. Intense. The kind of man who can own a room.

My stomach twists as I imagine meeting him for the first time. What do you even say to someone like that? What kind of expectations does a man like Carlito Marcelli have?

The soft buzz of my phone interrupts my thoughts. I glance at the screen, and my

breath hitches.

The subject line of the email reads: Meeting Venue Confirmed— Time and date to be sent later.

The message itself is as sparse as it is formal: “You will present your initial ideas at The Wynn’s private dining room. I expect professionalism. Carlito Marcelli.”

That’s it. No pleasantries, no room for interpretation. Just instructions.

I read it again, my pulse quickening. His words are precise, clipped, and utterly commanding. Even through an email, his presence feels tangible.

I close the email and set my phone on the coffee table, staring at the glowing skyline beyond the windows. I’ve worked for demanding clients before, but something about this feels... different.

My mind starts racing with questions. What kind of man sends an email like that? What does he expect from me, and what happens if I don’t meet those expectations?

A shiver runs through me as I lean back against the couch, clutching the folder to my chest.

This isn’t just about planning an event anymore. It’s about proving myself to a man who seems impossible to impress. A man whose reputation alone makes me second-guess every decision.

But I’ve faced high-stakes situations before, and I’ve come out stronger every time.

As the penthouse falls into silence, a quiet resolve settles over me. Whatever Carlito Marcelli throws my way, I’ll handle it.

I have to.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 2

#### Carlito

The sun dips below the horizon, casting a warm amber glow over the grounds of my villa. The view from my office window is serene—a sprawling backyard lined with hedges cut to geometric precision, the faint hum of a fountain in the distance.

Serene. Controlled. Just the way I like it.

On my desk lies a leather-bound portfolio. Bianca had spoken about Mia Caruso with the kind of enthusiasm that rarely leaves her lips. Talented. Adaptable. Someone even you'll respect, Daddy.

Respect is earned, not handed out. I learned that the hard way.

I flip the cover open and begin my review. The first project listed is a charity gala, its design sleek and restrained, perfectly balanced between elegance and sophistication. Every detail reflects careful thought.

The second spread showcases a vineyard wedding, its simplicity elevated to art. No unnecessary flourishes, no desperate attempt to impress. Just clean, deliberate choices.

“Interesting,” I murmur, turning the pages.

Bianca's glowing descriptions painted Mia as extraordinary, but this portfolio shows

something even rarer: someone who understands the value of restraint.

I lean back in my chair, my gaze drifting to the far wall where old photographs of past successes hang. My businesses thrive on precision, on control. The gala Bianca has tasked Mia with isn't just a celebration—it's a statement. A declaration to our competitors and associates alike that the Marcelli name remains unshakable.

And in my world, perception is as powerful as reality.

My hand brushes the edge of the folder as my thoughts shift to another gala from years ago. One that should have been a triumph but ended in betrayal. A trusted associate sabotaged the event, tarnishing my reputation and fracturing business alliances.

The lessons from that night carved themselves into my bones: trust no one, verify everything.

I turn another page in Mia's portfolio, studying her notes. They're thorough, direct, and confident.

Confidence is a double-edged sword. It can drive success or fuel arrogance. I'll determine which side of that blade Mia falls on when I meet her.

The soft knock at my door interrupts my thoughts. Leo steps in, his steady presence grounding. "You've gone through it?" he asks, nodding toward the portfolio.

"I have," I reply, closing the folder. "It's promising."

Leo's lips twitch into a faint smirk. "High praise, coming from you."

"She'll be tested," I say, rising from my chair. "Schedule the meeting for tomorrow

morning. The Wynn. Private dining room.”

“She’s already received confirmation,” Leo says, his tone amused.

I glance at him, raising a brow. “Good. Let’s see if she lives up to Bianca’s hype.”

Leo chuckles softly, lingering by the door. “She’s got talent. Bianca’s usually right about these things.”

“Talent isn’t enough,” I say, my voice cold. “We’ll see if she has the backbone to match it.”

Leo nods, reading the finality in my tone, and steps out, leaving me alone once more.

The night settles around me, my office bathed in a soft glow from the desk lamp. My focus sharpens. The gala will be perfect, every detail scrutinized. And Mia Caruso?

She’ll either rise to the challenge or crumble under the weight of my expectations.

I stand and move to the window, my reflection faintly visible in the glass as the last light of day gives way to night. The villa is silent, save for the soft hum of the air conditioning and the faint rhythm of the fountain outside.

This is how I like it—quiet, controlled. But tonight, my thoughts are anything but.

The name “Mia Caruso” lingers in my mind. Her portfolio revealed someone meticulous and adaptable, traits I value. But paper only tells half the story. People can be deceptive, hiding flaws beneath a polished surface. The gala demands more than technical skill. It demands someone who can thrive under pressure.

I know the type—fragile egos disguised as confidence, all smiles until the cracks

show. I've worked with enough people to spot them a mile away. But what intrigues me about Mia is the restraint in her work. Restraint speaks to discipline. Discipline suggests someone who can weather a storm.

Bianca's voice echoes in my mind: "You'll like her, Daddy. She's different."

Different. I've heard that before. Promises of loyalty and competence that always came with hidden agendas.

Living in two worlds requires precision. On the surface, I am the polished businessman, a name synonymous with power and success in Las Vegas. Behind closed doors, I wear another mantle—one far more dangerous.

The city bows to its own rhythm, and beneath the neon lights lies the heartbeat of organized crime. I am that rhythm.

Only Leo, my trusted consigliere, knows the truth. He has been my right hand for over a decade, overseeing the delicate balance between my legitimate empire and the darker Mafia one.

Neither Bianca nor Mia has any inkling of the other half of my life, and it's better that way. The less they know about my underworld dealings, the safer they remain.

The door opens behind me, and Leo enters, carrying a glass of scotch. He sets it down on the table with his usual efficiency, his expression calm and unreadable.

"She's confirmed for tomorrow," he says, his voice low but firm. "The Wynn, private dining room. Ten o'clock sharp."

I nod, my gaze still on the horizon. "Good. Let's see if she can hold her ground."

Leo lingers for a moment, his eyes sharp. “You’re putting a lot of weight on this gala.”

I turn to face him, my expression unchanging. “Because it carries weight. The right partnerships. The right perception. It’s not just a party, Leo. It’s strategy.”

He nods, a flicker of understanding crossing his face. “And Mia Caruso? Do you think she can handle it?”

“We’ll find out,” I reply evenly, taking the glass of scotch and swirling it absently. “Her work shows promise, but promise isn’t enough.”

Leo smirks faintly. “You always test people harder than anyone else does.”

“That’s because I trust no one,” I say without hesitation. “Trust is a losing game.”

Leo nods, his gaze steady. “Fair enough. But Bianca has an eye for talent. If she says Mia can handle it, she probably can.”

“Probably isn’t good enough,” I counter, the edge in my voice unmistakable.

He doesn’t press further, stepping back toward the door. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

As he leaves, the quiet of the room wraps around me once more. I glance at the clock—time is always slipping away, every second bringing tomorrow closer.

I pick up Mia’s portfolio one last time, studying the details with a critical eye. Her work is polished, yes, but I’ll find out if she has what it takes to face me head-on.

And if she doesn’t, I won’t hesitate to cut her loose.

The thought lingers as I return to my desk. Mia is a potential asset, but I've learned not to grow attached to potential. Potential is unproven. Potential can betray you.

I pick up my pen and make a few notes in the margins of her portfolio. Questions I'll ask her. Challenges I'll present. It's not about catching her off guard—it's about testing her response under pressure.

Pressure reveals the truth.

The phone on my desk buzzes, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance at the caller ID—an associate handling security for the gala.

"Everything is on schedule," the voice on the other end assures me. "Possible vendors have been vetted. Preliminary security plans have been drawn up."

"And the guest list?" I ask, my tone clipped.

"Reviewed and cleared," the associate replies. "The Marcelos will be attending."

Of course, they will. My biggest rivals in business—and in the unspoken game that runs beneath it. Their presence is both a challenge and an opportunity.

"Good," I say, keeping my voice even. "Make sure nothing is overlooked. One misstep could cost us."

"Understood."

I hang up and lean back in my chair, running a hand over my jaw. The Marcelos attending raises the stakes of this gala. Every detail must be perfect—not just for appearances but to solidify my position as the best.

It's not just a celebration. It's a chessboard, and every move matters.

My thoughts shift back to Mia. Bianca's faith in her is unwavering, but Bianca has the luxury of optimism. I don't. Optimism doesn't win wars.

I close the portfolio and rise, moving to the large windows overlooking the villa's grounds. The night is still, the stars faint against the glow of the city in the distance.

"She'll rise to the occasion," I murmur aloud, testing the words. But I'm not convinced.

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The next morning comes quickly, and the villa is alive with quiet efficiency. Leo greets me in the kitchen, a coffee already waiting on the counter.

"Mia's meeting is confirmed for ten o'clock at The Wynn," he says without preamble.

I nod, taking the coffee. "And security?"

"Already cleared," Leo replies. "It's a private dining room. Discreet."

I take a sip, the bitter heat sharpening my focus. "Good. Let's see how she handles this first test."

Leo raises a brow. "First test?"

I smirk faintly. "Everyone gets tested, Leo. Miss Caruso is no different."

He chuckles softly, shaking his head. "I almost feel bad for her."

“Don’t,” I say, setting the cup down. “She’s chosen this path. If she can’t handle it, she’s in the wrong business.”

As I prepare for the day, the thought of meeting her sharpens my curiosity. Bianca’s words echo in my mind— She’s different.

By the end of tomorrow, I’ll know if that difference is real.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 3

Mia

The lobby of The Wynn is breathtaking, a blend of modern elegance and quiet opulence. Polished marble floors gleam under the soft glow of crystal chandeliers, and the scent of fresh lilies from a nearby arrangement fills the air.

I take a deep breath, clutching my portfolio against my chest as I walk toward the private dining room. My heels click softly against the floor, a steady rhythm that's oddly comforting.

The confirmation email about the venue from Carlito Marcelli replays in my mind—precise, commanding, and devoid of pleasantries. It wasn't just an invitation; it was an order.

The double doors to the dining room loom ahead, each one flanked by sleek gold accents. A staff member stationed nearby greets me with a polite nod and gestures for me to enter.

As the doors open, my heart skips a beat.

The room is bathed in natural light from the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Las Vegas Strip. The table, a long piece of polished walnut, is set with nothing but a glass of water and a leather notepad.

And then there's him.

Carlito Marcelli stands near the window, his back to me as he gazes out over the city. Even from behind, his presence is magnetic. He's tall, his broad shoulders filling the tailored lines of his charcoal suit effortlessly.

I clear my throat softly, and he turns.

The air shifts the moment his dark eyes meet mine. They're sharp and assessing, a gaze that seems to cut straight through me.

"Miss Mia Caruso," he says, his voice low and smooth, yet carrying an unmistakable authority.

"Yes," I manage, my voice steady despite the nerves twisting in my stomach.

He gestures toward the seat across from him. "Please, sit."

I move quickly, settling into the chair and placing my portfolio on the table. He watches my every movement with a focus that's both unnerving and oddly captivating.

"Bianca speaks highly of you," he begins, his tone measured. "But I don't make decisions based on words alone."

"I wouldn't expect you to," I reply, surprising myself with the firmness in my voice.

One of his eyebrows lifts slightly, as though amused, but he says nothing. Instead, he leans back in his chair, his fingers steepled as he waits.

Taking a deep breath, I open my portfolio and begin. "I've prepared an initial concept for the gala. It focuses on elegance and timeless sophistication, with an emphasis on creating a lasting impression for the guests."

As I speak, I slide the portfolio across the table toward him. For a moment, our fingers brush as he takes it. It's a fleeting contact, but the warmth of his hand lingers longer than it should.

He flips through the pages, his expression unreadable. Every so often, his gaze flicks up to meet mine, sharp and assessing, as though measuring more than just the work in front of him.

"Interesting," he says finally, his voice giving nothing away.

The word hangs in the air, heavy and ambiguous. Is it a compliment? A critique? I can't tell.

I sit straighter, keeping my hands folded neatly on the table to hide the faint tremor in my fingers. "If there's anything you'd like adjusted or refined, I'm happy to make changes."

Carlito studies me, his dark eyes steady and unflinching. "Your work shows restraint. That's rare."

I blink, caught off guard by the comment. "Thank you," I say cautiously, unsure if it's meant as praise.

He turns another page in the portfolio, his fingers moving with a deliberateness that mirrors his tone. "Restraint can be a strength, but it can also be a weakness. It depends on the execution."

My pulse quickens, but I nod. "I agree. That's why I aim for balance—restraint where it adds elegance, boldness where it leaves an impression."

His lips twitch slightly, the closest thing to a smile I've seen from him. "And do you

think this gala will leave an impression?”

“I do,” I reply, my voice firm.

He leans back in his chair, closing the portfolio with a quiet snap. The sound echoes in the stillness of the room, making me hyperaware of the charged silence between us.

“This isn’t just about a party,” he says, his tone shifting to something sharper, more deliberate. “It’s about legacy. Image. Status.”

The intensity of his words sends a shiver down my spine. For a moment, I’m struck by how different he is from Bianca. She’s vibrant and effusive, all warmth and light. Carlito, on the other hand, is like a storm contained within a polished exterior.

“I understand,” I say, meeting his gaze. “Every detail will reflect the importance of the occasion. It will be exactly what you envision.”

He watches me for a beat longer, his expression unreadable. Then, without a word, he rises from his seat and moves to the window. The sunlight streaming in outlines the sharp angles of his face, making him look both imposing and almost otherworldly.

“You have confidence,” he says after a moment, his back still to me. “That’s good. Confidence is necessary in this business.”

I swallow, unsure how to respond.

“But confidence without results is useless,” he continues, turning back to face me. “Don’t let me regret trusting you with this.”

The weight of his words settles heavily over me. “I won’t,” I promise, my voice

steadier than I feel.

He nods, his expression softening by a fraction. “Good. We’ll start touring venues together in a few days. I want to see how you work in real time.”

The sudden shift in the conversation catches me off guard. “Venues?”

“Yes,” he says, his tone leaving no room for debate. “Caesars Palace. Four days from now, be ready.”

The words linger in the air like a command, leaving no room for hesitation. I nod, clutching the edge of my portfolio. “I will be.”

Carlito’s gaze holds mine for a moment longer, his dark eyes unreadable. Then, with a sharp nod, he turns his attention back to the cityscape outside the window. It feels like a dismissal, but I stay seated, unsure if I’m meant to leave or wait for further instructions.

Just as I’m about to stand, he speaks again. “Bianca told me you’re adaptable. That you can handle challenges most people can’t.”

The unexpected remark catches me off guard. “She’s generous with her praise,” I reply carefully.

“She’s honest,” he counters, his tone firm. “But I’ve learned not to take anyone’s word at face value.”

I swallow, feeling the weight of his scrutiny. “That’s fair. I believe actions speak louder than words.”

His lips curve into something that almost resembles a smile—sharp, fleeting, and

gone before I can fully register it. “Good. Then you’ll have no problem proving yourself.”

The room falls silent again, the tension thick and palpable. I rise slowly, sliding my portfolio back into my bag. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Marcelli,” I say, my voice steady despite the knots tightening in my stomach.

“Carlito,” he corrects, his gaze flicking to me.

“Carlito,” I echo, his name feeling foreign on my tongue.

As I turn to leave, his voice stops me mid-step. “Mia.”

I glance back, my hand hovering over the door handle.

“Don’t disappoint me,” he says, his tone a perfect balance of warning and expectation.

My chest tightens, but I nod. “I won’t.”

The door closes behind me with a soft click, and I release a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. The hallway feels cooler, less suffocating, but the weight of the meeting lingers.

Carlito Marcelli is nothing like I expected. Bianca’s descriptions barely scratched the surface of the intensity he radiates. Commanding is an understatement. Intimidating is more accurate.

I walk through the pristine corridors of The Wynn, my heels echoing against the polished floors. As I head toward the exit, I replay the meeting in my mind—his sharp gaze, his deliberate words, the way he seemed to size me up with every

response I gave.

I didn't crumble under the pressure, but I can't help wondering if I impressed him enough.

The midday sun greets me as I step outside, its warmth a stark contrast to the icy focus of Carlito's presence. I pull my phone from my bag, intending to jot down notes from the meeting, when a text from Bianca pops up on the screen.

“How did it go? Did Daddy scare you? ;)”

A small laugh escapes me despite the tension still coiled in my chest. Scare me? That's an understatement.

I type back quickly: “It was... intense. But I'm still standing.”

Her reply is instant. “Told you he'd like you! You'll be fine.”

I hope she's right.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 4

#### Carlito

The gilded entrance of Caesars Palace feels almost ostentatious against the clean, precise lines I favor, but I have to admit it fits the stakes of this gala. The ballroom, with its grand columns and sprawling ceiling painted like a fresco, radiates opulence.

Mia walks beside me, clutching her notebook and glancing around with a sharp eye. She looks calm on the surface, but I notice the subtle way her fingers tighten around her pen. Nervous energy. She's keeping it contained, but it's there.

"This space has potential," she says, her voice steady but thoughtful.

I nod, gesturing toward the high windows lining the far wall. "The natural light is a strength. But it also highlights flaws."

She follows my gaze, her brow furrowing as she studies the space. "Strategic lighting can balance that, especially during the evening hours. It's about emphasizing the grandeur while masking imperfections."

Her response is quick, deliberate. It's a good answer.

"And the acoustics?" I ask, my tone sharper, testing.

She pauses, taking a moment to step further into the room. Her heels click softly against the polished floor as she tilts her head, almost as if she's listening.



“It’s a challenge,” she admits, her gaze sweeping the space. “But with the right placement of speakers and sound dampeners, it can be managed. I’d recommend subtle live music during dinner and something more dynamic for the later hours.”

Her confidence surprises me. Most would falter under this kind of scrutiny, but she meets my gaze steadily when she turns back to me.

“I’ll refine the details once we finalize the venue,” she adds.

I step closer, narrowing the distance between us. “Do you always adapt this quickly?”

Her lips twitch, almost a smile. “It’s part of the job.”

Her answer is neutral, professional. Yet there’s a spark of something else—pride, maybe? Determination? It’s enough to make me linger for a second longer than I should before stepping back.

Leo waits near the far corner of the room, discreet but alert. His presence is a reminder of the stakes, though I doubt Mia sees it that way. To her, this is a gala for my legitimate business ventures, nothing more.

And it needs to stay that way—for now.

I gesture toward the center of the room. “Sketch out a rough layout. I want to see how you’d organize the space.”

She nods, immediately flipping open her notebook and scribbling notes. As she moves, I observe her closely—not just her process but the way she carries herself. There’s a calm precision to her actions, a quiet confidence that stands in stark contrast to the loud desperation I’ve seen in others trying to impress me.

“You’re thorough,” I say after a moment.

She glances up, surprised by the comment. “Isn’t that the expectation?”

“It is,” I reply, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth. “But not everyone meets it.”

Her shoulders straighten slightly, as if bolstered by the remark.

I let her work in silence for a moment, watching as her pen glides over the page. There’s a certain efficiency to the way she moves, like she’s done this a hundred times before. But there’s also a spark of creativity—a willingness to think beyond the obvious.

“Do you always work this fast?” I ask, my tone deliberately neutral.

She glances up briefly, her expression calm but alert. “Deadlines don’t wait, and neither do clients.”

I let out a low hum of approval. “True enough.”

As she continues sketching, I step away, taking a slow walk around the ballroom. The sheer scale of the space reminds me why this venue is a contender. It’s a statement—a place meant to command attention and respect.

But even the most impressive setting can falter under poor execution.

My gaze drifts back to Mia. She’s leaning over her notebook now, studying her design with a focused intensity. There’s no hesitation in her movements, no sign of the nervousness I spotted earlier.

Interesting.

“You seem confident,” I say, coming to stand beside her again. “But confidence can be dangerous if it isn’t earned.”

She straightens, meeting my gaze without flinching. “I don’t take anything for granted, Mr. Marcelli. Confidence is just preparation in disguise.”

The corner of my mouth twitches, almost a smile. “And are you prepared for this?”

Her answer is immediate. “Yes.”

The certainty in her voice catches me off guard. Most people stammer under pressure, scrambling to justify themselves. But not her.

I glance down at the notebook she’s holding out toward me. Her layout is clean, practical, but with just enough flair to elevate the design.

“This could work,” I say, flipping through her notes.

Her lips part slightly, as if she wants to ask something, but she hesitates.

“Speak your mind,” I say, my voice dropping lower.

She exhales slowly. “What are you most concerned about for this event? Logistics? Atmosphere? Or something else entirely?”

Her question is bold, but it’s the right one. I like that she’s not afraid to ask.

“Perception,” I reply, my tone measured. “This isn’t just a gala. It’s a declaration. Every detail—every decision—needs to send a message.”

She nods, her expression thoughtful. “Understood. I’ll make sure the message is clear.”

For a moment, we simply look at each other. There’s something about the way she carries herself—confident yet grounded—that intrigues me.

Leo approaches quietly, his steps barely audible on the polished floor. “The staff is ready for a final walkthrough whenever you are,” he says.

I nod, gesturing for Mia to follow. “Let’s see how this space performs in motion.”

As we walk, I fall into step beside her. Our arms brush slightly, a small, unintentional contact that sends a flicker of awareness through me. She doesn’t react, but I catch the faintest tension in her posture.

She’s composed. But she feels it too.

We enter the far side of the ballroom, where several staff members stand waiting. Their polished uniforms and clipped professionalism mirror the space’s grandiosity. Leo gives a brief nod to signal everything is in place, but my focus remains on Mia.

“Walk me through your vision,” I say, stepping aside to give her the floor.

She glances around, taking a steady breath before speaking. “The entrance should set the tone immediately—luxurious but welcoming. I’d suggest draped lighting across the columns to draw attention upward and add a sense of height. Guests should feel enveloped by the grandeur as soon as they step inside.”

She gestures toward the stage at the far end of the room. “The focal point will be here, with an elevated design that’s functional but doesn’t overshadow the rest of the space. Floral arrangements, minimalist but bold, can complement the architecture

without competing with it.”

Her voice is calm, deliberate, and filled with a quiet conviction that commands attention. Even the staff are watching her now, their expressions subtly impressed.

“Good,” I say, cutting through the silence once she finishes. “But what about transitions? Guests will move between areas throughout the evening. How do you maintain cohesion?”

Her gaze sharpens as she meets my question head-on. “I’d use lighting and texture to create subtle pathways—soft carpet runners leading to key areas, uplighting to guide focus. The transitions will feel seamless, almost invisible, but intentional.”

She answers without hesitation, her confidence unwavering. I glance at Leo, who arches a brow ever so slightly. Even he seems impressed.

Turning back to Mia, I cross my arms. “You’ve thought this through.”

“I have,” she replies simply.

For a moment, the only sound in the room is the faint hum of the air conditioning. I let the pause stretch, watching her carefully.

“Very well,” I say finally. “We’ll move forward with this layout—provisionally.”

Her lips curve into a faint smile, a hint of relief softening her features. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” I warn, stepping closer. “This is just the first step. There’s still a long way to go.”

She nods, her expression turning serious again. “I understand.”

I glance around the room once more, taking in the way her vision aligns with the space. It's ambitious, but it fits.

Leo steps forward, clipboard in hand. "The next venue is ready whenever you are."

"Not yet," I say, holding up a hand. My gaze shifts back to Mia. "We'll reconvene at The Venetian tomorrow. Be prepared to refine this concept further."

"I will be," she replies, her voice steady.

As we exit the ballroom, I fall into step beside her again. The faintest brush of her shoulder against mine sparks that same flicker of awareness.

"She's stronger than I thought," I murmur under my breath, my gaze fixed ahead.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 5

Mia

The Venetian Rooftop Terrace is more beautiful than I imagined. As I step out onto the sprawling open-air space, the Las Vegas skyline greets me, shimmering in the late-morning sun. The terrace feels like a hidden sanctuary above the city's chaos, its polished stone tiles gleaming underfoot.

"This is... perfect," I whisper, taking in the view.

"It's functional," Carlito replies from behind me, his tone measured.

I glance back at him, noting the way he surveys the space with a critical eye. Carlito's presence has a gravitational pull—commanding, calculated, and utterly in control. It's a sharp contrast to the serenity of the terrace.

Leo lingers near the terrace entrance, standing silently with his hands clasped in front of him. It's easy to forget he's there, always watching, always calculating. His presence adds a layer of formality to the meeting, but I chalk it up to Carlito's prominence. A businessman of his caliber needs security, especially in a city like Las Vegas.

I focus on Carlito, who's pacing slowly along the terrace's edge, his gaze locked on the skyline. He's dressed impeccably, as always, his tailored suit complementing his sharp features.

“Well?” he prompts, his voice snapping me back to the moment.

I straighten my shoulders and pull out my notebook. “It’s everything we need. The open layout allows for a customized setup that can highlight the skyline without obstructing it. Plus, the exclusivity ensures no distractions or interruptions.”

Carlito stops pacing, turning to face me. “And the logistics? Accessibility? Privacy?”

“Covered,” I reply confidently. “The terrace has multiple access points for staff and equipment, but all are discreet. Privacy is absolute, and the location keeps the event central yet separate from the hustle of the casino floor.”

He studies me for a moment, his sharp eyes narrowing slightly. “Good. But logistics aren’t enough. What about the impact? Will this venue make people remember the Marcelli name?”

The weight of his question settles over me, and I pause. There’s something deeper in his words, a personal stake that goes beyond the gala itself.

I meet his gaze. “With the right design and execution, this venue won’t just host an event—it will make a statement. People will leave talking about the Marcelli legacy for all the right reasons.”

For the first time, I see the faintest flicker of approval in his expression. It’s subtle, but it’s there.

“Let’s walk,” he says, motioning for me to follow him.

We move toward the far end of the terrace, where the view is at its most breathtaking. As we walk, I catch glimpses of his profile—strong, composed, and enigmatic. His silence feels heavy, as though he’s carrying something he hasn’t yet shared.



When we stop at the edge, he leans against the railing, his gaze fixed on the horizon. “This gala isn’t just another event,” he says, his voice quieter now. “It’s personal.”

Something in his tone makes my breath hitch. I glance at him, trying to read his expression, but his focus remains on the skyline.

“Personal, how?” I ask, unable to resist the pull of curiosity.

Carlito doesn’t answer right away. His gaze stays locked on the skyline, the tension in his posture palpable. I wait, unsure whether I’ve overstepped.

“Every move I make, every event I host—it all has consequences,” he finally says. “A name like Marcelli carries weight, but only if you can keep it from being crushed.”

The words hang between us, heavy with unspoken meaning. I watch him carefully, trying to decipher the layers beneath his carefully measured tone.

“So this gala... it’s not just for business?” I ask, my voice softer now.

He exhales a faint chuckle, though there’s no humor in it. “It’s always about business. But sometimes, business is survival.”

I blink at his response, startled by the rawness in his words. Carlito has always seemed untouchable—so composed, so in control. Yet here, on this terrace overlooking the city, there’s a crack in his armor. It’s fleeting, but enough to glimpse the man beneath the power.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” I admit.

“You wouldn’t have,” he says, his gaze flicking back to me. “That’s not a criticism,

Mia. It's just reality. You've lived in a world where events like this are celebrations. For me, they're statements—reminders of who is the best."

I feel a knot form in my stomach, a strange combination of unease and intrigue. Carlito's words are layered with a significance I can't fully grasp, and yet I'm drawn to them. To him.

"Well, if that's the case," I say, trying to inject a lighter note into the conversation, "then we'd better make sure this statement is unforgettable."

His lips quirk into something that might almost be a smile. "That's why you're here."

As he says it, his tone softens just enough to send a ripple of warmth through me. It's not quite approval, but it's closer than I've gotten before.

We resume walking along the terrace, the sound of our footsteps echoing faintly against the stone tiles. I point out potential layout ideas, suggesting where guests could mingle and how to arrange the seating to highlight the view.

Carlito listens intently, occasionally asking pointed questions that challenge my reasoning. Each time, I hold my ground, and with every answer I give, his expression shifts slightly—less skeptical, more thoughtful.

When we reach the far end of the terrace, he stops again, his gaze sweeping over the space. "The Venetian Rooftop Terrace," he says, almost to himself.

I turn to him, heart pounding. "So... does that mean this is the venue?"

He glances at me, his dark eyes unreadable. For a moment, I'm certain he's about to dismiss the idea entirely. Then, with a nod, he says, "It is. I prefer it to Caesar's Palace. Make it work."

Relief washes over me, and I can't help the smile that breaks across my face. "Thank you. I promise you won't regret this."

His gaze lingers on me a moment longer, and there's something almost... unguarded in it. Then he turns back toward the skyline.

As Carlito turns to leave, I linger for a moment, taking in the breathtaking view. The weight of his words still clings to the air, and I can't help but feel like there's more to this gala—and to Carlito—than I initially understood.

When I turn back, he's watching me, his expression unreadable. There's a subtle shift in the atmosphere, something electric that makes my pulse quicken.

"You're good at this," he says, breaking the silence.

I blink, caught off guard by the rare compliment. "Thank you. I've worked hard to get here."

"I can tell," he replies, his voice low and deliberate. "But hard work only gets you so far. Success requires more than effort—it demands vision, conviction."

The intensity in his gaze sends a shiver down my spine. "I have vision," I say, holding his stare.

His lips quirk in that faint, almost-smile that I'm starting to recognize. "We'll see."

He starts walking again, and I fall into step beside him. As we near the terrace exit, Leo steps forward, his sharp eyes darting between us before settling back into his stoic stance. The reminder of Carlito's ever-present security should feel reassuring, but instead, it adds to the tension simmering just beneath the surface.

Carlito stops near the doorway and turns to me. “Tomorrow, you’ll meet me at my penthouse. We’ll finalize the gala plans.”

“Of course,” I reply, already flipping through my mental checklist of tasks to prepare.

He steps closer, his presence filling the space between us. The scent of his cologne—warm and dark—makes my breath hitch.

“Mia,” he says, his voice softer now, almost intimate. “In my penthouse tomorrow, I will truly know if you’re ready for this.”

The way he says it sends a jolt of something undeniable through me. It’s not just the words, but the way his eyes linger on mine, heavy with meaning.

I nod, my throat suddenly dry. “I’ll be ready.”

His gaze flicks down to my lips for the briefest moment before he steps back. “Good.”

With that, he turns and strides toward the exit, Leo falling into step behind him. I exhale a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding, my heart pounding as I watch him leave.

The terrace feels impossibly quiet without him, the absence of his presence almost jarring. I gather my things, trying to steady myself. Tomorrow. His words echo in my mind, carrying a weight I can’t quite decipher.

As I make my way out of The Venetian, I can’t shake the feeling that this is more than just a professional challenge. Carlito Marcelli is a puzzle—one I’m both terrified and desperate to solve.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 6

#### Carlito

The city lights begin to twinkle outside the penthouse windows as the evening settles in, casting long shadows across the room. The pristine calm of my space feels deceptively steady compared to the undercurrent of tension I know tonight will bring.

The elevator chimes softly, and then the doors slide open, revealing Mia. She steps inside, looking more composed than I would have expected, given the limited time she's had to prepare since yesterday's tour at The Venetian. She's dressed professionally, but there's a spark of something less guarded in her eyes—determination, perhaps.

"Mr. Marcelli," she greets, though her tone carries an edge of weariness.

"Carlito," I correct, my voice firm but not unkind.

She nods slightly, her movements brisk as she sets her bag on the sleek glass coffee table and pulls out a few pages of notes. "I've made adjustments based on yesterday's discussion. They're not polished, but they're actionable."

The admission is unexpected. She's usually meticulous, prepared down to the last detail. But she isn't making excuses, and that earns my respect more than flawless execution ever could.

"Show me," I say, gesturing toward the chair across from mine.

She hands me a slim stack of papers, her fingers brushing mine briefly. The touch is fleeting but enough to make me pause for a moment longer than necessary before I take the documents.

As I scan the pages, I note the ideas are sharp—streamlined, almost ruthless in their efficiency. They're good. But they're not great.

"This feels rushed," I say, setting the papers down and leveling her with a steady gaze.

"It was," she replies without hesitation. "But I didn't want to present something that wasn't relevant to the feedback you gave me yesterday. I focused on what matters."

Her honesty is disarming. Most people would try to bluff their way through, but Mia lays her cards on the table with an almost reckless confidence.

"Fair enough," I say, leaning back in my chair. "And if I find this inadequate?"

"Then I'll fix it," she says simply, meeting my gaze without flinching.

I study her for a moment, intrigued by the fire simmering just beneath her calm surface. "You seem to enjoy being tested," I remark.

"No," she replies, a hint of a smile playing at her lips. "But I do enjoy proving people wrong."

The corner of my mouth lifts in a slow smile. "Good. Then you'll fit in just fine."

For the first time tonight, her composure cracks slightly, and I catch the flicker of uncertainty in her expression. It's gone almost as quickly as it appears, replaced by that resolute confidence I've come to expect from her.

“Let’s continue,” I say, gesturing toward the rest of her notes.

Mia adjusts in her seat, smoothing her skirt as I glance through the rest of her notes. There’s a faint hum of tension in the room, one I can’t quite ignore.

“These placement ideas for the VIPs,” I say, gesturing to one of the diagrams. “What’s the logic behind them?”

She leans forward, pointing to the layout. Her perfume lingers in the air—a soft, subtle scent that catches me off guard. “The goal is to balance visibility and access. The keynote speaker and sponsors should feel central without overshadowing the overall atmosphere. It keeps the flow dynamic.”

Her explanation is sharp and to the point, but I don’t let her off the hook easily. “Dynamic isn’t always practical. What happens when one of these sponsors wants to leave early or demands a last-minute change?”

Mia’s lips press together briefly, and I know I’ve struck a nerve. But instead of faltering, she surprises me. “Then we adapt,” she says firmly. “These aren’t rigid placements—they’re starting points. I can pivot if needed, as long as the main structure stays intact.”

Her confidence is refreshing, even if it grates against my tendency to control every variable. “You’re awfully sure of yourself.”

“No,” she replies, meeting my gaze directly. “I’m sure of my work.”

For a moment, I don’t respond. Her words hang in the air, challenging me in a way few people ever do. There’s an intensity to her that’s impossible to ignore—a fire that makes me want to push her even further, just to see how far she’ll go before she breaks.

I set the notes down and fold my hands in my lap, leaning back slightly. “You’ve done well,” I say, though my tone remains measured. “But well isn’t good enough. Not for this event.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, a flicker of frustration breaking through her polished exterior. “I’m aware of the stakes, Carlito. This gala isn’t just a reflection of your business—it’s a reflection of me.”

Her words are a sharp reminder that she has just as much riding on this as I do. And yet, there’s something else in her tone—something personal.

“Why are you really doing this?” I ask, my voice soft but insistent.

Her brows knit together in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“This isn’t just a job to you,” I say, watching her closely. “There’s something more. What is it?”

Mia hesitates, and for a moment, I think she’s going to deflect. But then she exhales softly and says, “Because I want to prove that I can handle something this big. That I belong here.”

Her honesty catches me off guard. Most people would’ve fed me some line about ambition or loyalty, but Mia lays her vulnerabilities bare with a courage that demands respect.

“And you think this gala will do that?” I ask.

“I know it will,” she replies, her voice steady.

Her determination is maddening—and intoxicating.



“You’ve got a lot of faith in yourself,” I say, leaning forward slightly. “Let’s hope it’s not misplaced.”

Her eyes lock onto mine, her chin tilting upward slightly in defiance. “It’s not misplaced,” she says, her voice quiet but firm.

The fire in her gaze sends a jolt of something dangerous through me. For a moment, the line between professional and personal blurs into something unrecognizable, and I feel the unmistakable pull of desire—one I haven’t allowed myself to feel in years.

I rise from my seat, pacing to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. The lights of Las Vegas stretch endlessly, bright and unyielding, a sharp contrast to the storm brewing inside me.

“You’re confident,” I say, my back to her. “But confidence can only get you so far.”

Mia stands as well, and I can hear the rustle of her clothes as she moves closer. “And what about you?” she asks, her tone tinged with something I can’t quite place.

I turn to face her, and the space between us feels smaller than it should. “What about me?”

Her gaze doesn’t waver, though I can see her chest rising and falling just slightly faster. “You push people, Carlito. But you never let anyone push you. Why is that?”

Her question is unexpected, and it cuts deeper than I care to admit.

“Because I don’t have the luxury of failure,” I reply, my voice low and measured.

Her brows knit together in thought, and for the first time, I see something other than determination in her expression. Empathy.

“Neither do I,” she says softly.

The words hang between us, charged with meaning neither of us is willing to fully acknowledge.

“Mia—” I start, but she cuts me off.

“No,” she says, taking another step closer. “I know what you’re doing, Carlito. You’re testing me. Trying to see how far you can push before I break. But let me tell you something—you’re not the only one who doesn’t break easily.”

Her words are a challenge, and they ignite something primal in me. Before I can think better of it, I close the distance between us, my hand brushing against her arm. The contact is electric, sending a shiver through me that I’m certain she feels too.

Her breath hitches, and for a moment, the world narrows to just the two of us. The professional walls we’ve both worked so hard to maintain crumble in an instant, and all that’s left is the undeniable pull of something neither of us can control.

“Mia,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

She doesn’t respond, but she doesn’t pull away either.

My hand cups her cheek, my thumb brushing against her soft skin. She trembles at my touch, her breath coming in shallow gasps. I lean in, my lips hovering over hers, and whisper, "You want this, don't you?"

Mia's eyes flutter closed, and she nods, her body pressing against mine. "Yes," she breathes, her voice hoarse with desire.

I claim her mouth in a kiss, my lips moving urgently against hers. She tastes like

temptation, a sweet poison I want to drink from endlessly. My hands roam over her body, mapping every curve, memorizing her softness. I feel her hands on my suit jacket, tugging at the lapels, and I help her slide it off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor.

Breaking the kiss, I trail my lips down her neck, nipping and sucking gently, eliciting a soft moan from her. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do this," I murmur against her skin.

"I think I have an idea," she replies, her voice breathy. Her hands find the buttons of my shirt, deftly undoing them one by one, her touch sending shivers down my spine.

I step back, letting her admire my bare chest, the muscles honed from years of discipline and control. Her eyes darken with desire, and I can see the hunger in her gaze. "You like what you see?" I ask, my voice laced with a challenge.

Mia's response is swift and bold. She takes a step forward, her hands running over my chest, her touch sending waves of pleasure through me. "I love it," she whispers, her lips brushing against my skin.

I groan, my body responding to her touch. "Then take it," I urge, my voice thick with need. "Take what you want."

She doesn't need to be told twice. Her hands move lower, unbuckling my belt with practiced ease. I hiss as she slides her hands beneath my pants, her fingers wrapping around my cock, already hard and straining against my boxers. "You're so ready for me," she purrs, her breath hot against my ear.

I bite back a curse, my body on fire. "Fuck, Mia," I growl, my hands finding her hips, pulling her closer. "You have no idea."

With a swift motion, I lift her onto the nearby couch, the surface cool against her bare legs. Her dress rides up, exposing her thighs, and I waste no time in exploring the soft skin. I kiss and nip at her inner thighs, my hands gripping her hips, holding her in place.

"Please," she begs, her back arching off the couch. "I need you, Carlito."

"You need this?" I ask, my voice gruff as I nuzzle her core through her lace panties. "You need my mouth on you?"

"Yes," she pants, her hands threading through my hair, urging me on.

I don't need to be told twice. I hook my fingers under the elastic of her panties and slide them down her legs, my mouth replacing my hands. Her taste is intoxicating, and I lap at her eagerly, my tongue flicking and probing, driving her wild. Her hips buck against my mouth, her moans filling the room.

"Carlito, I'm close," she gasps, her hands gripping the edge of the couch.

I redouble my efforts, my tongue working her clit in steady circles, my fingers plunging into her wet pussy. "Come for me, Mia," I command, my voice hoarse. "Let go."

Her orgasm hits her like a wave, her body trembling as she cries out my name. I continue to pleasure her through the climax, my tongue and fingers relentless, until she's reduced to a quivering mess, her legs weak and shaking.

I stand, my body aching with need, and she looks up at me with lust-filled eyes. "Now it's my turn," I growl, my voice laced with dominance.

Mia's eyes widen, but she doesn't resist as I guide her to the edge of the couch,

positioning her on her knees. I step back, taking in the sight of her exposed body, her breasts heaving with each breath. "You're so beautiful," I whisper, my voice rough.

She bites her lip, her eyes sparkling with desire. "Please, Carlito. I need you inside me."

I let out a low growl, my control slipping. I position myself behind her, my hands gripping her hips as I guide my throbbing cock to her entrance. With one swift thrust, I bury myself deep within her, claiming her as mine.

Mia cries out, her body adjusting to my size. I give her a moment to acclimate before I begin to move, my hips snapping forward, my hands holding her firmly in place. "You feel so fucking good," I groan, my breath hot against her neck.

She moans in response, her body moving in perfect rhythm with mine. "Harder," she pleads, her voice thick with need. "Please, Carlito, harder."

I oblige, my hands tightening on her hips as I pound into her, my cock filling her over and over. Her cries fill the room, a symphony of pleasure and desire. I lean forward, my lips finding her ear, my teeth gently nipping her lobe. "You like it rough, don't you, baby?" I whisper, my voice a dangerous promise.

"Yes," she pants, her head falling back against my shoulder. "I want it all, Carlito. Everything you have to give."

Her words are like a match to dry kindling, igniting a fire within me. I thrust harder, faster, my body slamming into hers, my control slipping further with each stroke. "You want it rough? I'll show you rough," I grunt, my hands moving to her breasts, squeezing and kneading the sensitive flesh.

Mia cries out, her body trembling on the edge of another climax. "Yes, yes, yes!" she

chants, her nails digging into my arms.

I feel her walls clench around me, her body tightening as she comes again, her orgasm rippling through her. I follow her over the edge, my own release building to an unbearable peak. With a final, powerful thrust, I spill into her, my body shaking with the force of my climax.

We collapse onto the couch, our hearts pounding in unison. I hold her close, my hands stroking her back as we catch our breath. "Fuck, Mia," I breathe, my voice hoarse. "That was incredible."

She turns in my arms, her eyes sparkling with satisfaction. "It was," she agrees, her lips curving into a satisfied smile.

As she stands, her body still trembling from the intensity of our encounter, I can't help but feel a sense of possessiveness. I want to keep her here, claim her as mine, but I know that's not how this works.

She straightens her dress, her movements graceful, and looks at me with a mixture of desire and uncertainty. "I should go," she says, her voice soft.

I nod, my hand reaching out to caress her cheek one last time. "Thank you, Mia."

She bites her lip, her eyes holding mine for a moment longer than necessary. "Oh, the pleasure is all mine," she whispers, her voice laced with desire.

As she walks toward the elevator, I feel the pull to stop her, to say something—anything—that makes sense of this. But I stay silent, my hands clenched into fists at my sides.

When the elevator doors close behind her, the tension in my chest tightens further.

“This changes everything,” I mutter to myself, staring out at the city that suddenly feels smaller, less certain.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 7

Mia

The morning sunlight filters through the thin curtains of my apartment, casting a soft glow over the room. I sit cross-legged on the edge of my bed, notebook open in front of me, but the words blur together as my mind replays last night in vivid detail.

Carlito's hands on me. The heat of his breath against my skin. The way he looked at me, like he saw something more than just the gala planner he hired.

I press my fingers to my temple, trying to silence the whirlwind of emotions. Last night wasn't supposed to happen. It shouldn't have happened.

But it did.

I close the notebook, setting it aside as I rise to my feet and pace the small room. The rational part of me knows this changes everything. Professional boundaries have been crossed, and there's no undoing that. But the other part of me—the part that still feels the phantom weight of his touch—can't stop wondering what it means.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and I snatch it up, half-expecting to see his name. Instead, it's Bianca.

"I'm coming over. We need to talk!"

I groan, setting the phone down without replying. Bianca always has a knack for



showing up unannounced, but today of all days, I don't think I'm ready for her endless questions and probing looks.

There's a knock at the door barely twenty minutes later, and I open it to find her standing there, coffee cups in hand and a mischievous grin on her face.

"Good morning!" she chirps, brushing past me into the apartment.

"Hi," I reply, shutting the door and trailing after her.

She sets the cups on the kitchen counter, her gaze sweeping over me with a calculating look. "You look... different."

I raise an eyebrow. "Different how?"

She shrugs, leaning against the counter. "I don't know. Less stressed. More... distracted."

I force a laugh, hoping it doesn't sound as strained as it feels. "It's probably just the lack of sleep. I was up late working on some final touches for the gala."

Bianca narrows her eyes, clearly unconvinced, but she lets it slide—for now. Instead, she grabs one of the coffee cups and hands it to me.

"You should take a break," she says. "You've been working nonstop, and trust me, my dad's not worth that level of stress."

Her words hit differently now, after last night. "Your dad's intense, but he's also... passionate," I say carefully.

Bianca snorts. "Passionate about control, maybe. Don't let him bulldoze you, Mia. He

respects people who stand their ground. It's rare, but he has a soft side under all that gruffness."

Her words linger in the air, and I can't help but wonder if she would still say the same thing if she knew the truth about last night.

Bianca takes a sip of her coffee, her gaze flicking back to me. "So, spill. How are things going with the planning?"

I take a slow sip from my cup, buying myself a moment to think. "It's... extreme. Your father has high expectations."

She smirks. "That's the understatement of the year. But if anyone can handle him, it's you. He's been surprisingly complimentary about your work, by the way. That's rare."

My stomach flips at the mention of Carlito, and I set my coffee down carefully. "He's just invested in making the gala perfect. It's a big deal for him."

"True," Bianca says, tapping her nails against the counter. "But I think it's more than that. My dad doesn't put this much trust in people unless he sees something special in them."

Her words send a chill down my spine, but I push the thought aside. "It's just work, Bianca. Nothing more."

She narrows her eyes at me, her smile fading slightly. "You're a terrible liar, you know that?"

I freeze, my pulse quickening. "What are you talking about?"

She leans closer, her voice dropping. “Something’s different about you. I don’t know what it is, but I can feel it. And knowing my dad, I’m guessing he’s part of it.”

I swallow hard, struggling to keep my expression neutral. “You’re imagining things.”

Bianca straightens, her brow furrowing. “Maybe. But be careful, Mia. My dad’s... complicated. He’s not an easy man to deal with, and he has a way of pulling people into his world without them realizing it.”

Her words send another shiver through me, but I force a laugh. “You make him sound like a supervillain.”

She rolls her eyes. “He’s not a villain. He’s just... intense. And he doesn’t let people in easily. But once you’re in, you’re in for good.”

The weight of her words presses down on me, and I glance away, pretending to check the time. “I appreciate the warning, but everything’s fine. Really.”

Bianca doesn’t look convinced, but she lets it go, grabbing her bag and heading for the door. “Fine. I’ll back off—for now. Just remember what I said.”

I nod, forcing a smile. “Thanks, Bianca.”

As the door closes behind her, I lean against the counter, letting out a shaky breath. Her intuition is unnerving, and I can’t shake the feeling that she’s already piecing things together.

With Bianca gone, I turn to stare at my phone, half-expecting a message from Carlito. Instead, I’m met with silence, and it only makes my thoughts spiral further.

Carlito’s absence in my inbox should feel like a relief, but instead, it leaves an ache I

don't know how to explain.

The moments replay in my mind—his hands, his voice, the raw intensity of it all. I press my fingers against my temples, willing myself to focus. This isn't who I am.

Grabbing my notebook from the counter, I flip to the gala plans, forcing myself to review the venue diagrams. The lines blur together at first, but slowly, I start to settle into the details—the flow of the space, the lighting arrangements, the guest seating. This is what I know. This is what I can control.

But even as I lose myself in the work, thoughts of Carlito creep back in. His words from the terrace at The Venetian echo in my mind. Tomorrow, we'll see if you're truly ready for this.

I wasn't ready—not for that, not for him.

My phone buzzes suddenly, pulling me from my thoughts. The name on the screen makes my pulse jump.

Carlito.

My thumb hesitates over the screen for a second before I open the message.

“We're meeting tomorrow at The Bellagio, 7 p.m. Bianca will join us to finalize her role in the gala. Don't be late.”

No greeting, no unnecessary words—just pure command, as always.

I read the message twice, my stomach tightening. Bianca will be there. That should help keep things professional, but the thought of being near him again makes my pulse race.

I set the phone down and push away from the counter, pacing the small kitchen. Bianca's visit earlier feels different now, her warnings taking on a sharper edge.

He doesn't let people in easily. But once you're in, you're in for good.

Am I already "in"? The thought terrifies me as much as it intrigues me. I've spent so much time building walls—protecting myself from disappointment, from failure—but Carlito doesn't seem to care about those walls. He pushes past them with ease, leaving me exposed in ways I'm not prepared for.

I stop pacing and take a deep breath. I have a job to do—a role to play. Whatever happened last night, whatever it means, I can't let it derail me.

But as I sit back down at the table, my hands find the necklace resting at my collarbone—a nervous habit I've had since childhood. The gesture grounds me, but it also stirs something deeper.

The question I've been trying to avoid rises to the surface, unavoidable now.

What if I'm in over my head?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 8

#### Carlito

The boardroom in the Venetian is all polished wood and sleek glass, its opulence a reflection of the stakes at hand. Evening casts a golden glow through the floor-to-ceiling windows, highlighting the weight of the discussion.

Bianca sits across the table, her posture relaxed but her sharp gaze betraying her intent. She's observant, always has been. Mia sits to my left, her notebook open and pen in hand, as though bracing for another barrage of questions.

"Alright," Bianca begins, her tone deceptively light. "Let's talk about why I need to be involved in this gala in the first place."

"You represent the personal side of the Marcelli image," I reply, keeping my voice measured. "It's good for optics. The public sees a strong, successful family. It's... persuasive."

Bianca narrows her eyes at me, her lips curving into a knowing smile. "Persuasive, huh? And what about Mia? She's the one pulling this whole thing together. Seems to me you're already covered on the professional front."

Mia glances at me, startled by the unexpected compliment. Her cheeks flush a delicate pink as she quickly looks back down at her notes.

"She's done exceptional work so far," I admit, my tone neutral despite the tug of

warmth that Mia's reaction stirs in me. "But this isn't just about the logistics of the event. It's about perception."

Bianca crosses her arms, leaning back in her chair. "Perception is great, but I can't help but notice how much you're relying on her."

Her statement hangs in the air, weighted with implications. My jaw tightens, but before I can respond, Mia speaks up, her voice steady despite the tension.

"I appreciate the trust, Bianca," Mia says, her tone polite but firm. "But this is a team effort. Your presence adds a personal touch that no amount of planning can replicate."

Bianca raises a brow, clearly impressed by Mia's poise. "Nice deflection," she says with a grin. "You're good at this."

Mia offers a small smile, but her fingers grip her pen just a bit tighter.

"Good enough to deserve a little credit," Bianca adds, her gaze shifting to me. "Don't you think, Dad?"

Her words are pointed, deliberate. I meet her gaze evenly, knowing full well what she's implying. "I've given her credit where it's due," I reply. "This isn't about playing favorites. It's about results."

Bianca smirks, leaning forward. "Results. Right. Just don't let your... personal feelings get in the way of business."

Her words hit their mark. Mia's blush deepens, and for once, I find myself at a loss for a response.

Instead, I lean back in my chair, exuding calm control even as her observation sharpens my focus.

“This isn’t personal,” I say at last, my voice even. “It’s practical. You’re a part of this family, and that makes you an asset.”

Bianca’s smirk falters for a moment, but she recovers quickly, her gaze darting to Mia. “I’m an asset, huh? And what about my dear Mia over here? I think she’s proving to be more than just a contractor to you.”

Mia’s eyes widen slightly, and her hand freezes mid-note. “I’m here to do my job,” she says, her voice steady despite the tension. “And I appreciate the opportunity to work on something this important.”

Bianca studies her for a moment, then nods. “Deflecting again, Mia. I like that.”

“Enough,” I cut in, my tone firm but not harsh. “Bianca, your role is critical. This event is as much about legacy as it is business. Your involvement strengthens the message we’re sending.”

Bianca sits back, her expression softening slightly. “Legacy,” she echoes, her voice quieter now. “That’s a heavy word, Dad.”

I glance at her, noting the flicker of vulnerability in her eyes. “It is,” I admit. “But you’re strong enough to carry it.”

She doesn’t respond immediately, her gaze shifting to Mia. “Well, if I’m carrying legacy, I’m glad I have my best friend here to keep me grounded. This thing’s going to be huge.”

Mia smiles, the tension easing slightly. “That’s what I’m here for. To make sure



everything runs smoothly.”

Bianca exhales sharply, shaking her head. “I don’t know how you do it, Mia. Balancing all this pressure and my father’s... demands.”

Mia glances at me briefly, her cheeks warming. “It helps when the stakes are clear. This event matters, and that keeps me focused.”

Bianca gives her a knowing look. “Focused, huh? You’ve got nerves of steel, I’ll give you that. But don’t let him intimidate you too much. He might be a perfectionist, but deep down, he’s all bark and no bite.”

“Bianca,” I warn, my tone low.

She holds up her hands in mock surrender, grinning. “Relax, Dad. I’m just saying. She’s already got you wrapped around her finger, whether you realize it or not.”

Mia’s blush deepens, and she looks away, pretending to jot something down in her notebook.

“See? Even she knows it.”

Mia clears her throat, her voice steady despite the flush in her cheeks. “I think we’ve covered everything we need for today. Bianca’s role is clear, and I’ll ensure the details reflect her importance to the gala.”

Bianca smirks knowingly. “Fine. I’ll play along. But don’t expect me to act like some perfect debutante.”

“I’d never ask that of you,” I interject, my tone firmer than intended. “Be yourself, but remember this event reflects the family. Every move matters.”

Bianca gives a small salute. “Yes, sir. Anything else, or am I free to escape now?”

I nod toward the door. “We’re done here.”

Bianca stands, stretching dramatically. Before leaving, she throws a parting glance at Mia. “Good luck with him. You’ll need it.”

The door closes with a soft click, leaving an electric silence between us. Mia busies herself with her notebook, avoiding my gaze. Her movements are precise, but there’s an edge of tension I don’t miss.

“You handled that well,” I say, breaking the quiet.

Her head snaps up, and for a second, something flickers in her eyes—an echo of the intimacy we shared. “Bianca’s protective of you,” she says, deflecting.

“She’s perceptive,” I reply evenly, stepping closer. The way Mia’s fingers tighten around her pen doesn’t escape me.

“I noticed,” she murmurs, dropping her gaze back to the papers in front of her. “But it’s good to see how much she cares about the gala.”

“You’ve earned her respect.” I pause, searching her expression for any sign of acknowledgment of our shared night. “And mine.”

Her cheeks color faintly, but she keeps her focus on her notes. “Thank you, Carlito. That means a lot.”

The use of my first name, deliberate or accidental, sharpens the air between us. For a moment, I think she might say more, but instead, she slips her notebook into her bag and straightens.

“I’ll finalize the details and have them ready for review by tomorrow,” she says, her tone clipped.

I step closer, the space between us charged. “Mia.”

Her breath catches, but she forces herself to meet my gaze. “Yes?”

“There’s something we haven’t addressed,” I say, my voice lower now.

Her lips part, and for a brief second, vulnerability flashes across her face. “If you’re referring to—”

“I’m not.” I cut her off, the words harsher than I intend. Her shoulders stiffen, and I hate the way her guard snaps back into place. “I’m referring to the gala. Security needs to be a priority.”

Relief and something akin to disappointment flicker in her eyes. “Of course. I’ll coordinate with your team.”

“Good.” I step back, giving her space.

She nods, her professionalism firmly in place once again. “Well, if there’s nothing else, I should get started on the updates.”

“Mia,” I say again, softer this time.

She pauses at the door, her hand on the knob, waiting.

“Thank you,” I say, the words coming out rougher than intended. “For everything.”

Her gaze softens, and a faint smile tugs at her lips. “You’re welcome, Carlito.”

She slips out the door, leaving me alone in the stillness of the room. I stare after her, the weight of unspoken words pressing heavily on my chest.

This tension between us is becoming harder to ignore.

---

Minutes after Mia leaves, the quiet of the boardroom is interrupted by Leo stepping in, his expression unreadable as always. He shuts the door softly behind him, the faint click grounding me back into reality.

“There’s something you need to see,” Leo says, sliding a tablet across the polished surface of the table. On the screen is a grainy still from security footage—a man, nondescript except for the way he carries himself. Confident, too confident for someone who should be invisible.

“Who is he?” I ask, my tone sharp as I study the image.

“Not sure yet,” Leo replies. “But he’s been spotted hanging around a few of our vendors’ locations. Could be a scout, could be someone testing the waters.”

“Or it could be worse,” I murmur, the implications settling heavily in my chest.

Leo nods, his voice steady. “I’ll dig deeper. But whoever he is, he’s playing close to our orbit. That makes him a problem.”

I lean back in my chair, my gaze fixed on the screen. “Make sure the problem doesn’t become a threat. I want his movements tracked and everything about him uncovered.”

Leo smirks faintly. “Already on it.”

As he leaves the room, my focus shifts back to the image on the tablet. The man is a stranger to me, but the way he carries himself is all too familiar of a Mafia type. He moves like someone with a purpose. Someone who doesn't plan to leave quietly.

The gala is fast approaching, and with it comes an audience strangers I cannot control.

I set the tablet aside, my thoughts circling back to Mia. She has no idea what kind of life I lead and what kind of world she's about to be dragged into.

If this stranger is a sign of what's to come, the path ahead is going to be a whole lot more interesting.

Tomorrow, Mia will face her own challenges, though she has no idea how dangerous they might turn out to be.

### Chapter 9

Mia

It's been two days since the boardroom meeting with Bianca and Carlito. The soft hum of voices and the occasional clatter of cutlery echo through the vendor meeting room in the Venetian. It's a polished, understated space—elegant without trying too hard. The neutral tones of the walls and the gleaming table at its center reflect the meticulous standards Carlito expects for his gala.

I glance at my notes, running through the vendor proposals again. Today feels heavier than usual, the pressure mounting with every passing day. Carlito's words from when we were with Bianca ring in my ears: The gala isn't only about logistics. It's about perception.

It's mid-afternoon, and my scheduled meetings have gone smoothly so far. This is where I thrive—coordinating, negotiating, and balancing the complex puzzle of an event as grand as this one. Yet, for some reason, my skin prickles with unease.

“Ms. Caruso?” A voice snaps me out of my thoughts.

I look up to see a man standing at the edge of the room. He doesn't belong here. Dressed in a dark suit, his posture is casual but his eyes... there's something unsettling in them.

“Yes?” I reply, keeping my tone professional as I stand.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your discussion with the florist,” he says smoothly, his lips curving into a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “You have quite an eye for detail.”

“Thank you,” I say cautiously, instinctively taking a step back. “Are you with one of the vendors?”

“Not exactly,” he replies, his gaze lingering on me in a way that sends a shiver down my spine. “Let’s just say I have a personal interest in events like this. Particularly... the people involved.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. There’s no way this man stumbled into this meeting room by accident. I glance toward the door, hoping one of the staff might intervene, but it’s empty save for the two of us.

“I’m sorry, but this is a private meeting,” I say firmly. “If you’re not part of the event, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

The man tilts his head, his smile widening. “Of course. I just wanted to meet the woman behind all this. Mia Caruso, right? You have an interesting... history.”

My stomach twists, but I force myself to keep my expression neutral. How does he know my name?

“I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“Not yet,” he says cryptically. “But I know you. More than you think.”

Before I can respond, he steps closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “You might want to be careful, Ms. Caruso. Not everything—or everyone—is what they seem. Including your oh-so-perfect world here at the Venetian.”

He turns and walks out, leaving me frozen in place. My heart pounds in my chest, and the weight of his words sinks deep into my mind.

I stand motionless for a moment, his words echoing in my head like the lingering vibration of a struck bell. You might want to be careful, Ms. Caruso. Not everything—or everyone—is what they seem.

The door swings shut behind the stranger, breaking the spell. My breath catches as I glance around the room, searching for any sign that someone else might have witnessed the bizarre encounter. But the space is empty, save for the stack of proposals and the perfectly arranged vase of flowers at the center of the table.

I grab my phone with trembling fingers, hesitating for only a second before dialing the one person I trust in this moment. Carlito.

The line clicks, and his deep voice answers almost immediately. “Mia?”

“Are you still in the building?” I blurt out, my voice sharper than intended.

“Yes,” he replies, his tone shifting into something colder, more alert. “What’s wrong?”

“I—I think someone just tried to intimidate me.” I glance at the door again, half-expecting the stranger to return. “He knew my name. He knew... things. Personal things.”

There’s a brief silence on the other end before Carlito speaks, his voice calm but edged with steel. “Where are you now?”

“The vendor meeting room, second floor,” I reply.



“I’m on my way. Don’t move.”

The call ends abruptly, leaving me clutching the phone to my chest. I exhale slowly, trying to steady my racing heart, but every creak of the floor outside the room makes me jump. I don’t know who that man was, but his presence felt calculated, deliberate, and far too personal.

A few tense minutes later, the door opens—not with the slow, eerie creak I feared but with Carlito’s sharp, purposeful stride. His commanding presence immediately fills the space, and relief washes over me like a tidal wave.

His eyes sweep the room, scanning for any sign of danger. “Tell me everything,” he says, his voice low and firm.

I recount the encounter as succinctly as possible, focusing on the stranger’s cryptic words and his unnerving demeanor. Carlito listens in silence, his expression growing darker with every detail.

When I finish, he steps closer, his presence grounding me in a way I can’t explain. “Did he say his name?”

I shake my head. “No, but he knew mine. He acted like... like he knows me. Or something about me.”

Carlito’s jaw tightens. “Leo will investigate. In the meantime, I’ll make sure security around you is doubled.”

“I don’t think he’s here for the gala,” I say softly, the fear creeping back into my voice. “It felt... personal.”

Carlito’s eyes meet mine, and for a moment, the usual guardedness in his expression

gives way to something softer. “You’re safe here,” he says, his voice a shade gentler.

And then, before I can think better of it, I step forward, seeking the reassurance I so desperately need. My hands brush against his chest, and he doesn’t pull away.

“Mia...”

His voice is a warning, but I barely hear it. The fear, the tension, the weight of everything crash over me at once, and for a fleeting second, I let myself feel protected.

Carlito’s arms instinctively come around me, strong and steady, as if shielding me from the weight of the world. For a moment, I allow myself to lean into his embrace, letting his presence ground me. The sharp edges of fear and uncertainty fade, replaced by a warmth I don’t dare name.

“You’re safe, Mia,” he murmurs, his voice low and reassuring.

The words, so simple yet so charged, unravel something inside me. I close my eyes briefly, letting myself believe it. In his arms, the chaos of the moment dims, and I feel like nothing can touch me.

But then reality creeps back in. My cheeks flush as I pull away, the heat of embarrassment replacing the comfort I’d felt just seconds ago.

“I’m sorry,” I say, shaking my head and taking a step back. “I didn’t mean to... I just—”

Carlito raises a hand, cutting off my apology. “Don’t.” His voice is calm, but there’s an edge of authority that stops me cold. “You’ve been through enough. There’s no need to explain.”

I nod, clutching my notebook against my chest like a shield. “Thank you. For... everything.”

He studies me for a moment, his dark eyes unreadable. “Mia,” he says, his tone shifting to something softer, almost hesitant. “If you ever feel unsafe, you call me. No hesitation. Understand?”

I swallow hard, nodding. “I understand.”

Before either of us can say more, the door swings open, and Leo steps inside. His sharp gaze flickers between Carlito and me, lingering for a fraction of a second before landing squarely on Carlito.

“Sir,” Leo says, his voice crisp and professional. “I’ve already started looking into the matter. Security cameras in the Venetian should have caught something.”

Carlito gives a short nod, the commanding aura I’ve come to associate with him snapping back into place. “Good. I want to know who he is, why he’s here, and how he got close to Mia without anyone stopping him.”

Leo nods. “I’ll update you as soon as I have something concrete.”

Carlito turns back to me, his expression softening slightly. “I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

The certainty in his voice is comforting, but it also makes me wonder—how far will he go to ensure that? There’s a quiet intensity in Carlito that both reassures and unsettles me, as if he’s capable of things I can’t quite imagine.

“I trust you,” I say, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Carlito holds my gaze for a beat longer than necessary, his lips curving into the faintest semblance of a smile. “Good.”

Leo clears his throat. “If you’re ready, we can head to the surveillance room.”

Carlito nods, gesturing toward the door. “Stay here for now, Mia. I’ll handle this.”

I hesitate, wanting to argue, but the steel in his gaze tells me it’s not a request. “Alright,” I finally say, my voice quiet.

As the two men leave, the door closing firmly behind them, I let out a shaky breath. The room feels bigger, emptier, without Carlito’s presence. I glance at the papers scattered across the table, but my focus is elsewhere.

The stranger’s parting words replay in my mind, chilling and cryptic: “Nothing is what it seems. Including your oh-so-perfect world here at the Venetian.”

Who was he? And why did he feel so familiar, as though he’d been watching me long before today?

I sit down and grip my pen tightly, forcing myself to write down notes for the gala. But my thoughts drift, and no matter how hard I try to focus, one thing is clear.

Whoever that man was, he’s not done with me yet.

### Chapter 10

#### Carlito

The Venetian Rooftop Terrace hums with life, the polished stone tiles gleaming under the late morning sun. Vendors and staff move with purpose, unpacking crates and arranging the space according to Mia's meticulous designs. The once-empty venue is transforming, every detail a reflection of her vision and the high stakes of tomorrow's gala.

I step onto the terrace unannounced, my eyes sweeping over the activity. Near the center, Mia stands with a small group of decorators, her hazel eyes focused as she gestures toward a centerpiece display. Her calm yet commanding presence stands out against the bustle, a sharp contrast to the frantic energy I've encountered from less capable planners in the past.

"Mia," I call out.

She turns, her expression shifting as she recognizes me. A faint smile touches her lips before she tucks it away, her professional demeanor slipping into place.

"Carlito," she says, her voice steady as she approaches. "You're early."

"I like to see things before they're finished," I reply, letting my gaze drift across the terrace. "Easier to spot problems that way."

Her brow arches slightly, a subtle challenge in her expression. "So far, the problems

have been minimal. We're ahead of schedule."

"Good," I say, my attention lingering on the skyline for a moment before returning to her. "Leo's still looking into that man you mentioned from the vendor meeting."

Her faint smile fades, replaced by a shadow of concern. "Any leads?"

"Not yet," I admit. "But we've tightened security. You're safe here, Mia."

Her shoulders ease, but only slightly. "Thank you," she says softly. "That's... reassuring."

I nod, noting the resilience in her tone. She's stepped into a world of power and danger without truly understanding the stakes, yet she holds her ground.

---

The terrace is alive with coordinated chaos as Mia leads me through the walkthrough. Her voice cuts through the commotion, steady and sure, as she outlines the details. We pause near the bar setup, where staff arrange rows of gleaming glassware.

"This placement ensures easy access for guests while keeping the flow natural," she explains, gesturing to the layout. "We'll use accent lighting to draw attention without overwhelming the design."

"Practical," I say, scanning the setup. "You've accounted for guest traffic patterns?"

She nods, her confidence evident. "Based on the guest list, there should be minimal congestion."

"Good."

A faint curve of satisfaction touches her lips at my response, though she doesn't dwell on it. Instead, she straightens her blazer and moves on, pointing out the entertainment area and seating arrangements.

Her poise impresses me. Though I sense traces of nervous energy beneath her polished exterior, she carries herself with an assurance that I rarely see in people navigating this kind of pressure.

The walkthrough flows smoothly until a commotion near the vendor entrance interrupts the rhythm. A truckload of deliveries has bottlenecked at the loading area, crates spilling into the pathway. A flustered staff member waves his arms, helpless as the scene escalates.

"I'll handle this," Mia says, her tone firm.

Before I can respond, she strides toward the chaos, leaving me to watch her with growing interest.

Mia moves quickly, her heels clicking against the stone tiles as she approaches the delivery area. The harried staff member steps aside, relief flickering across his face when she takes charge.

"What's the issue?" she asks, her voice calm but commanding.

"The crates weren't labeled properly," he stammers, gesturing toward the cluster of boxes blocking the path. "We didn't realize they were for separate vendors until—"

"It's fine," she interrupts, her tone decisive. "Let's clear a path first, then sort out the labels. Focus on what's urgent."

She crouches to inspect one of the crates, scanning the small, misaligned label. Her

brow furrows as she mutters something to herself, then she turns to the staff. “Bring me a dolly. We’ll relocate the misplaced boxes to the secondary holding area for now.”

The staff member hesitates but nods, hurrying off to retrieve the equipment. I step closer, staying just out of the way but observing her intently. She doesn’t notice me watching—or if she does, she pretends not to. Her focus is entirely on solving the problem.

When the dolly arrives, Mia wastes no time directing the staff to reposition the crates. Despite the chaos, her tone remains calm, her instructions clear. Within minutes, the path is cleared, the flow of deliveries resuming as if the disruption never happened.

She exhales softly, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. There’s a faint flush to her cheeks, a sign of the energy she’s poured into fixing the situation.

“Efficient,” I say, stepping forward.

Her head snaps up, her hazel eyes locking onto mine. For a moment, she looks surprised, as if she forgot I was there. “It was a minor issue,” she says, straightening her blazer.

“Minor issues can derail major events,” I reply. “You handled it well.”

She hesitates, her lips curving into a faint smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Thank you.”

I notice the way her hand lingers on the crate she steadied, as if she’s anchoring herself. Stepping closer, I place a hand on the same crate, the briefest contact sparking something between us.



Mia looks away quickly, tucking her notepad under her arm as she pivots back toward the terrace. “Shall we continue?”

---

We walk the length of the terrace, her confidence returning with each step. She points out the adjustments she’s made since our last visit—the refined layout of the seating arrangements, the repositioned lighting to highlight the skyline.

“This will be the main photo area,” she explains, gesturing toward an arch of cascading floral arrangements framing the cityscape. “It’s designed to draw guests toward the view while keeping the flow of the event natural.”

“It’s bold,” I say, studying the design. “But it works.”

A flicker of surprise crosses her face, quickly replaced by satisfaction. “I thought so too.”

As we near the terrace edge, I catch a faint breeze carrying the scent of freshly cut flowers. Mia pauses, her gaze sweeping over the venue. There’s a quiet pride in her expression, tempered by the weight of responsibility.

“It’s coming together,” she says softly, almost to herself.

“It is,” I agree, stepping beside her. “You’ve done well, Mia.”

She turns to me, her hazel eyes searching mine. There’s something unspoken in her gaze, a vulnerability she doesn’t often show. “I just want it to be perfect.”

“It will be,” I say, my tone softer than I intend. “Because you made it that way.”

Her lips part slightly, but whatever she's about to say is interrupted by a gust of wind sending a stray piece of paper fluttering across the terrace. She laughs lightly, the tension breaking, and bends to retrieve it.

When she stands, the moment has passed, but its weight lingers.

As the walkthrough draws to a close, the terrace settles into a steady rhythm. Vendors continue their work, but the earlier sense of chaos has ebbed, replaced by a calm efficiency that mirrors Mia's leadership.

She turns toward me, flipping through her notepad. "That's everything for now. The rest of the setup will be finalized tomorrow morning, but I'll be here early to oversee it personally."

"Good," I say, noting the determination in her voice. "This is your vision, Mia. See it through."

Her gaze softens at my words, but she quickly refocuses, her pen tapping lightly against the edge of her notepad. "Is there anything else you'd like to review while we're here?"

"No," I reply, glancing once more at the terrace. "You've covered everything."

Her shoulders relax slightly, the tension she's carried throughout the day easing just a fraction. Still, I can see the questions flickering behind her eyes, though she doesn't voice them.

"Tomorrow will test you," I say, stepping closer. Her breath catches, though she keeps her expression neutral. "Stay alert, stay professional, and trust your instincts. You've earned this."

She hesitates, then nods, her hazel eyes meeting mine. “Thank you. That means more than you know.”

For a moment, the world narrows to just the two of us, the hum of activity around us fading into the background. I’m reminded of how much she doesn’t know—about me, about the risks surrounding this gala. About how much more complicated her life is about to become.

“Mia,” I begin, my voice quieter now.

She tilts her head slightly, waiting.

Before I can continue, Leo’s voice cuts through the air, sharp and efficient. “Carlito.”

I turn to see him waiting near the terrace entrance, his expression unreadable but his presence a reminder of the responsibilities I can’t ignore.

“I’ll leave you to finish here,” I say, stepping back.

Mia watches me for a moment, as if debating whether to say something, but she simply nods. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I glance back as I leave the terrace, taking in the way the sunlight catches her hair, the way she stands tall despite the pressure bearing down on her.

---

Leo falls into step beside me as we descend the staircase, his tone low and measured. “Everything is progressing as expected. But there’s still no update on the man she saw.”

“Keep looking,” I say curtly. “I want to know who he is and why he’s here.”

Leo nods, his silence conveying more than words ever could. He knows the stakes as well as I do—knows what’s at risk if this gala goes wrong.

As we reach the ground floor, I pause, my gaze drifting back toward the terrace. Mia’s shadow is visible against the skyline, a reminder of how much has shifted since she stepped into my life.

“This is the final push,” I murmur, more to myself than to Leo. “Tomorrow, Mia is in for the surprise of her life and I hope she doesn’t let me down.”

### Chapter 11

Mia

The Venetian Rooftop Terrace is unrecognizable. What was a blank canvas just days ago now glows with opulent décor, soft lighting casting a golden hue over the elegantly draped tables and the polished stone tiles. Floral arrangements—bold yet understated—adorn every corner, their fragrant blooms perfectly complementing the luxurious setting. The shimmering lights of the Las Vegas Strip provide a dramatic backdrop, reflecting in the glass panels that frame the terrace.

I step onto the terrace, the murmur of guests mingling blending with the gentle strains of a live quartet. The atmosphere is charged with energy, a mixture of awe and expectation that makes the air hum.

I take a moment to absorb the scene, pride swelling in my chest. This is my work, my vision brought to life. Every detail, from the flickering votive candles to the seamless flow of the seating arrangements, speaks to weeks of meticulous planning.

Bianca spots me from across the terrace, her dark curls bouncing as she makes her way over. She throws her arms around me in a hug so tight it almost knocks the air from my lungs.

“You did it, Mia!” she exclaims, pulling back to beam at me. “I knew you could.”

“Thanks, Bianca,” I reply, my voice thick with emotion. Her enthusiasm is infectious, and for the first time tonight, I allow myself a real smile.

She squeezes my shoulders before stepping back. “Seriously, it’s perfect. Even Daddy will have to admit it.” With a wink, she spins on her heel and disappears into the crowd, her laughter trailing behind her.

I let out a breath and glance around, my attention darting from one detail to the next. Guests are arriving in a steady stream now, their designer suits and shimmering gowns adding to the sense of grandeur. Among them are high-profile figures I recognize from the guest list—politicians, business magnates, and members of prominent families. Their presence sets my nerves buzzing, but I remind myself that this is exactly what Carlito wanted.

Carlito.

The thought of him stirs something in me, a mixture of anticipation and unease. I haven’t seen him yet tonight, but I know he’s here somewhere, watching, waiting.

I catch sight of Leo near the entrance, his ever-watchful gaze scanning the crowd. His presence, like always, is a quiet reminder of the stakes. Security is tight, but the memory of the stranger from the meeting the other day lingers at the edge of my mind.

Shaking off the unease, I refocus on the task at hand. A waiter passes by with a tray of champagne flutes, and I take one, the cool glass grounding me as I sip. Tonight is about celebrating the success of this event, a culmination of everything I’ve worked for.

As I move through the crowd, nodding politely to guests and checking on the staff, I can’t help but reflect on how far I’ve come. Just weeks ago, I was sitting in Bianca’s penthouse, clutching a folder of notes and wondering if I was in over my head. Now, I’m standing at the center of an event that could solidify my career.

But it's not just my career on the line tonight—it's my heart.

I'm making a mental note to check in with the catering team when I feel it—a shift in the atmosphere, subtle but undeniable. Conversations lower by a fraction, and heads turn almost imperceptibly toward the entrance.

Carlito Marcelli has arrived.

I glance up just as he steps onto the terrace, his commanding presence impossible to ignore. Dressed in a charcoal suit that fits him perfectly, he moves through the crowd with a confidence that's both effortless and deliberate. Guests part for him instinctively, their deference a testament to the weight his name carries.

My heart pounds against my ribcage as his dark eyes scan the room, unerringly finding mine. He holds my gaze for a moment longer than necessary, and something electric passes between us, a connection that feels both exhilarating and dangerous.

He approaches slowly, nodding to a few key figures as he makes his way across the terrace. When he reaches me, the noise of the crowd seems to fade, leaving only the steady thrum of my pulse in my ears.

"Mia," he says, his voice low and deliberate.

"Carlito," I reply, trying to keep my tone steady despite the way my nerves flare under his intense gaze.

He looks around briefly, as if to ensure the audience he's gathered is paying attention, before turning his full focus back to me. "This is impressive. You've done exceptional work."

His words carry weight, not just because of who he is, but because of the quiet

authority in his tone. It's not just a compliment—it's a declaration.

"Thank you," I say softly, my cheeks warming under the scrutiny of the nearby guests. "It means a lot coming from you."

He steps closer, just enough that the space between us feels charged. I catch the faint scent of his cologne, warm and heady, and it sends my thoughts tumbling back to that night in his penthouse. His hands, his breath, the way he looked at me like I was the only thing that mattered in the world.

I force myself to focus as he speaks again, his voice dropping slightly. "You've proven you can handle pressure. That you can excel under it."

There's something in the way he says it, an undercurrent of pride that feels almost personal. I glance up at him, my hazel eyes meeting his dark ones, and for a moment, the rest of the world fades away.

But then the sound of laughter nearby pulls me back to reality, and I take a step back, creating a sliver of distance between us.

"I should check on the staff," I say, my voice a little too rushed. "Make sure everything's running smoothly."

"Of course," Carlito replies, his expression unreadable but his eyes still locked on mine. "You have a gift for that."

I nod and turn to leave, but I can feel his gaze lingering on me as I move through the crowd. My skin tingles under the weight of it, the memory of his presence staying with me long after I've walked away.

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The evening moves at a measured pace, the kind that's both satisfying and nerve-wracking. Guests laugh and mingle, the quartet plays seamlessly, and the caterers work like clockwork. Yet, despite the event's success so far, I can't shake the feeling of being watched.

I glance around, half-expecting to see the stranger from the vendor meeting lurking in the shadows. Instead, I find Carlito, standing near the edge of the terrace. He's speaking with Leo, his posture relaxed but his expression serious.

The sight of him brings a rush of emotions I'm not ready to unpack. His presence has always been magnetic, but tonight, there's something else—a vulnerability beneath the surface that makes my chest tighten.

I shake my head, willing myself to focus. This is a professional triumph, a night I should be proud of. But the closer I get to Carlito, the harder it is to separate the personal from the professional.

It's a bit later in the evening when Carlito finds me again. I'm standing near the edge of the terrace, watching as the quartet transitions into a livelier tune, when his voice cuts through the noise like a thread pulling me back to him.

"Mia."

I turn, and there he is, his dark eyes steady as they lock onto mine. He's close enough now that I can feel the faint heat of his presence, and it takes all my focus to keep my breath even.

"Carlito," I reply, my voice softer than I intend.

"The gala is flawless," he says, his tone low but resolute. "You should be proud."

“Thank you,” I say, though the words feel inadequate against the weight of his gaze. “It means a lot to hear that from you.”

For a moment, the world around us seems to blur. The laughter, the music, the clinking of glasses—all of it fades, leaving only the charged silence between us.

“I need a moment with you,” Carlito says suddenly, his voice quieter now, almost intimate.

Surprised, I glance around at the crowd. “Now?”

He nods, his expression unreadable but his intent clear. “Now.”

Without waiting for my response, he gestures for me to follow him. My pulse quickens as I fall into step behind him, weaving through the glittering sea of guests until we reach a quieter corner of the terrace. The view here is breathtaking, the lights of the Strip stretching endlessly beneath us.

Carlito turns to face me, his expression softer now, though no less intense. “I wanted to thank you,” he begins, his voice low and deliberate. “Not just for tonight—for everything. You’ve done more than I ever expected.”

There’s something in his tone that sends a shiver down my spine. It’s not just gratitude—it’s something deeper, something raw.

“You don’t have to thank me,” I say, though my voice wavers slightly. “This is my job.”

His lips twitch into a faint smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “You always say that. That it’s just a job. But I see the way you work, Mia. The way you care about every detail. That’s not just professionalism—that’s passion.”

His words strike something deep within me, and I look away, the weight of his gaze almost too much to bear. “I just wanted it to be perfect,” I admit quietly. “For you.”

He steps closer, and when I look up, he’s only inches away. The tension between us is palpable now, a magnetic pull that neither of us can seem to resist.

“It is perfect,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper.

The air between us is electric, charged with the memory of that night in his penthouse. My skin burns under his gaze, and my heart pounds as he lifts a hand, his fingers brushing lightly against my cheek.

“Mia,” he murmurs, and the way he says my name feels like both a question and an answer.

I don’t respond, my breath hitching as he leans in slightly, his dark eyes searching mine. But just as the moment stretches toward something inevitable, he stops, his jaw tightening as he steps back.

“There’s something I need to show you later,” he says, his tone shifting back to its usual control, though his eyes remain softer. “A surprise.”

“A surprise?” I echo, my voice trembling slightly as I try to recover from the intensity of the moment.

He nods, his expression enigmatic. “You’ll see.”

Before I can press him further, he turns and walks away, leaving me alone with the glow of the city lights and the storm of emotions he’s left in his wake.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 12

#### Carlito

The gala is a masterpiece. The Venetian Rooftop Terrace shimmers under the night sky, soft golden lights reflecting off polished stone and crystal glasses. The air hums with music and conversation, a perfect blend of elegance and power. Yet, as I stand at the edge of the crowd, my focus isn't on the success of the event or the high-profile guests mingling under the stars. It's on Mia.

She's moving through the crowd with her usual grace, her hazel eyes scanning the terrace to ensure every detail is perfect. She's in her element, but even now, I catch the tension in her posture, the way she checks her notes with just a little too much precision. She doesn't see what I do—the quiet brilliance of her work, the way she's already exceeded every expectation.

I take a deep breath, steadying the thoughts racing through my mind. This moment isn't just about the gala. It's about what comes next.

Leo appears at my side, his presence grounding. He speaks low, his voice cutting through the din. "The ring is ready. Are you?"

I glance at him, the weight of the question heavier than it should be. Am I ready? The idea of asking Mia to marry me started as just an idea—a way to boost my status. But somewhere along the way, it became something else.

"Yes," I reply, my tone firmer than I feel.

Leo nods and steps back, melting into the crowd. My gaze finds Mia again, her chestnut hair catching the light as she laughs softly with Bianca. The sight tugs at something deep in my chest.

This isn't just about business. It's about her.

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The music shifts, a quieter, more romantic tune weaving through the night air. I take it as my cue, striding toward Mia with purpose. She notices me as I approach, her laughter fading as her eyes meet mine.

"Carlito," she greets, her tone a mix of surprise and warmth.

"Mia," I say, holding out a hand. "May I have a moment?"

She hesitates, glancing around the bustling terrace, but then she nods, slipping her hand into mine. "Of course."

I lead her away from the crowd, toward the farthest edge of the terrace where the city stretches out in a glittering expanse below. The noise of the gala fades into the background, replaced by the soft murmur of the wind.

Mia pulls her hand back gently once we stop, her expression curious but cautious. "What's this about?"

I turn to face her fully, the weight of the moment settling over me. "I wanted to speak with you. Alone. As I said earlier, I've got a surprise for you."

Her brows knit together, but she nods. "Alright."

I take a step closer, my voice quieter now. “This gala—it wouldn’t have been possible without you. Your talent, your vision, your determination. You’ve done more than I ever imagined.”

Her cheeks flush slightly, and she looks down, clearly unaccustomed to the praise. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“It’s more than that,” I continue, my gaze steady on her. “You’ve earned my respect, Mia. My trust.”

Her hazel eyes lift to meet mine, and for a moment, the world seems to pause.

I take a breath, steadying the rush of emotions threatening to overwhelm me. This isn’t how I pictured myself—a man known for control and strategy—standing here, vulnerable under the stars.

“Mia,” I say, her name carrying more weight than I intend. “I need you to understand something. This isn’t just about tonight. It’s not just about the gala.”

Her brows knit together, confusion flickering across her face. “What do you mean?”

I step closer, closing the space between us. Her eyes search mine, and I can see the mix of curiosity and wariness in their depths.

“You’ve become more than I expected,” I admit, my voice low. “You’re not just someone I respect professionally. You’ve shown me something I didn’t think I could have—trust. Admiration. A reason to believe in more than just business.”

Her lips part slightly, but no words come. I press on before the weight of my confession can stop me.

“When Bianca brought you into this world, I saw potential in you,” I continue. “But now... I see so much more. I see someone I want by my side, not just for this night, but for every night.”

Her breath catches, and I take the opportunity to reach into my jacket pocket. The small box feels heavier than it should as I pull it out and open it, revealing a gleaming diamond engagement ring that catches the light like a fragment of the city skyline.

Mia’s eyes widen, her hand flying to her mouth.

“Marry me,” I say, my voice steady but laced with vulnerability. “Not because it’s expected or about business. Marry me because I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

She stares at me, her chest rising and falling as if the words have knocked the wind out of her. For a long moment, she doesn’t say anything, her emotions flickering too quickly for me to decipher.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” she finally whispers, her voice trembling.

I take a step closer, my hand still holding the ring aloft. “Say yes, Mia. I know this is sudden, and I know it’s overwhelming. But trust me, just as I trust you.”

Her hazel eyes search mine, and I can see the turmoil in her expression. She’s weighing the enormity of the moment, the risks, the unknowns.

The quiet stretches on, the city lights sparkling around us like witnesses to this pivotal moment.

Mia takes a shaky breath, her gaze flickering between the ring and my face. Her lips part again, and for a moment, I brace myself for rejection.

“Yes,” she says softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

The word hits me like a jolt of electricity. Relief, pride, and something deeper—something I don’t dare name—rush through me all at once. I take her hand, sliding the ring onto her finger with a precision that feels almost ceremonial.

The engagement ring glints in the moonlight, a stark contrast to her trembling hand. She looks at it, then at me, her expression a mix of wonder and disbelief.

“Yes,” she repeats, this time louder, as though she’s convincing herself.

Before either of us can say more, a sudden cheer erupts from behind us. I glance over my shoulder to see the crowd of guests standing at the terrace’s edge, their applause filling the night air.

Mia’s cheeks flush a deep crimson as she turns toward the crowd, her hand still clasped in mine. “They were watching?” she whispers, her voice a mix of embarrassment and disbelief.

“Of course,” I reply, my tone steady. “This isn’t just for us. It’s for them too.”

She looks up at me, her brows furrowing slightly. I can see the question in her eyes, but she doesn’t voice it. Not yet. Instead, she turns back to the crowd, offering a polite, if somewhat dazed, smile.

The applause grows louder, and a few voices rise above the rest. “Congratulations!” “Beautiful couple!” “About time!”

Bianca is the first to break from the crowd, her laughter ringing out as she rushes toward us. “Mia!” she exclaims, throwing her arms around her. “You said yes! Welcome to the family!”



Mia laughs nervously, her hand brushing against Bianca's shoulder as she hugs her back. "This is... a lot," she says, her voice still tinged with disbelief.

Bianca pulls back, her green eyes sparkling. "A lot? This is amazing! You two are perfect for each other. I've been telling you that from the start!"

She turns to me, her smile bright and knowing. "Good move, Dad. Very good move."

I smirk, the weight of the moment balanced by Bianca's unrelenting enthusiasm. "Thank you, Bianca."

The rest of the crowd begins to approach, offering their congratulations. Handshakes, hugs, and glasses of champagne are thrust our way, the terrace buzzing with celebration.

Mia stays close to me, her fingers occasionally brushing mine as she accepts the well-wishes. I can feel the tension in her, the weight of what she's just agreed to.

As the crowd begins to disperse, returning to the gala's festivities, I lean closer to her, lowering my voice so only she can hear.

"You won't regret this," I say, the words carrying both promise and certainty.

Her hazel eyes meet mine, wide and searching. She doesn't respond, but the way her fingers tighten slightly around my hand tells me everything I need to know.

### Chapter 13

Mia

The terrace is quieter now. The guests have mostly drifted back toward the gala's heart, their excited whispers fading into the background hum of music and conversation. Yet, I'm rooted to the spot, the weight of Carlito's words and the glint of the engagement ring on my finger keeping me anchored in this surreal moment.

Carlito stands beside me, his hand warm and steady against mine. His gaze moves from the ring to my face, his dark eyes softer now than I've ever seen them. For the first time tonight, the control he wears like armor seems to slip, revealing something vulnerable, something real.

"We should return," I say, my voice barely audible. But Carlito doesn't move.

"Not yet," he replies, his tone low but deliberate. His words make my heart pound all over again.

Before I can question him, Carlito turns and gestures to Leo, who steps forward with the quiet efficiency I've come to associate with him. Leo listens as Carlito murmurs something, nodding sharply before retreating into the crowd.

"What was that about?" I ask, my pulse quickening.

Carlito's lips quirk into a faint, enigmatic smile. "You'll see."

Moments later, the lights on the terrace subtly shift, growing softer, warmer. The music transitions seamlessly into something slower, more intimate. Around us, the staff begins moving with quiet precision, rearranging tables and clearing a small open space near the terrace's edge.

Realization dawns, and I whirl to face Carlito. "What are you doing?"

"We're not waiting," he says simply, his voice carrying the calm certainty of a man who always gets what he wants.

My heart lurches. "You mean—"

"The wedding," he says, his tone firm but not unkind. "Here. Tonight."

I blink at him, my breath catching in my throat. My mind races, trying to grasp the enormity of what he's suggesting. "Carlito, this is... it's too much. I—"

He steps closer, cutting off my words with his steady gaze. "It's perfect, Mia. Everything is already here—the people, the setting, the moment. There's no reason to wait."

The calm conviction in his voice is like a tether, pulling me back from the edge of panic. But even as I nod, as if on autopilot, my thoughts are a chaotic storm.

Bianca appears at my side, her emerald eyes wide with excitement. "Mia!" she exclaims, throwing her arms around me. "Oh my God, I can't believe this! You're getting married tonight!"

I try to respond, but my words stick in my throat. Bianca doesn't seem to notice. She pulls back, her hands gripping my shoulders. "Don't worry, I'll be your maid of honor! Who else would it be?"

“Bianca,” I start, but the sound of Carlito’s voice interrupts me.

“Everything is ready,” he says, stepping forward to offer his arm.

Bianca squeals softly before letting go of me, her enthusiasm spilling over as she rushes toward the center of the terrace. I glance at Carlito, his expression steady, expectant.

I take a breath, steadying myself as best I can, and slip my hand into the crook of his arm. As we move toward the makeshift altar, the question lingers in my mind: What have I just agreed to?

The terrace feels like a dreamscape now, transformed into something intimate and ethereal. The gentle glow of the lights casts golden halos on the guests’ faces, and the soft strains of violin music weave through the air. Everything about this moment feels perfect, except for the chaos in my chest.

I barely register Bianca returning to my side, her hands busy smoothing the fabric of my dress and adjusting stray strands of my hair. “Mia, you look stunning,” she says, her voice brimming with genuine admiration. “This is going to be magical.”

Magical. I glance at Carlito, who’s standing a few paces away, speaking quietly to someone from the staff. His presence commands the space, his broad shoulders and poised stance making him look like he belongs in this spotlight.

My gaze falls to the ring on my finger, its brilliance catching the terrace lights. A part of me wants to run, to take a moment to think, to breathe. But as my eyes lift to Carlito again, something in his steady confidence grounds me.

Bianca grabs my hand, pulling me toward the makeshift altar. “Come on, it’s time! I’ll be right here with you.”

Carlito turns as we approach, his dark eyes locking onto mine. The faintest trace of a smile softens his features, and for a fleeting moment, the noise in my head quiets.

Leo steps forward and clears his throat, addressing the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. Tonight, we celebrate not just a proposal but a union—a commitment as enduring as the city lights that surround us.”

There’s a low murmur of approval from the guests as they settle into place, forming an impromptu semicircle around the altar.

Carlito offers me his hand again, and I take it, my fingers trembling slightly. He draws me closer, his grip firm but not unkind. “Are you ready?” he asks, his voice low enough that only I can hear.

I nod, though I’m not entirely sure the answer is yes.

The officiant begins speaking, his words flowing over me like a distant echo. I’m too caught in my own head, replaying the whirlwind events that led to this moment. When did I lose control? Or... did I ever have it to begin with?

As the officiant talks of love and trust, Carlito’s thumb brushes lightly against my hand, pulling me back to the present. I glance up at him, and the intensity in his gaze takes my breath away. There’s something deeper there, something raw and unguarded.

When it’s time to exchange vows, I hesitate, my mind searching for the right words. “Carlito,” I begin, my voice trembling. “This... this isn’t what I expected. But somehow, it feels...” I pause, the words catching in my throat. “...right.”

He doesn’t break eye contact, his deep voice steady as he responds. “Mia, you are stronger than you realize. And I will stand by you, no matter what. Always.”

The sincerity in his tone makes my chest tighten. This man, who is so commanding, so often unreadable, is laying something bare in front of all these people.

The officiant calls for the rings, and Carlito produces a simpler yet equally striking platinum wedding band. He slides it onto my finger with precision, placing it beside the engagement ring already resting there, as if sealing a pact only he fully understands.

As I take his hand to return the gesture, the enormity of this moment crashes over me. I glance at the two rings now on my finger, the engagement ring's boldness paired with the wedding band's quiet elegance. Together, they feel like a perfect representation of Carlito himself—unyielding yet deeply deliberate.

“By the power vested in me,” the officiant begins, but his words blur as Carlito steps closer.

“You’re mine now,” he murmurs, his voice soft but filled with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine.

The officiant declares us husband and wife, his words punctuated by the sound of applause rising from the crowd. The cheers are thunderous, an overwhelming wave of celebration that seems to vibrate through the terrace. But I barely register it. All I can feel is Carlito—his hand still holding mine, his gaze never leaving my face.

“You may kiss the bride,” the officiant says, his voice ceremonial and calm.

Carlito's free hand moves to my cheek, his touch warm and deliberate. His eyes soften as he leans in, and before I can process the moment, his lips meet mine. The kiss is firm yet tender, a mixture of possession and reassurance that takes my breath away.

The applause crescendos, guests shouting their approval and raising their glasses in toasts. When Carlito pulls back, his thumb brushes my cheek lightly, his voice low so only I can hear. “We’ll do this our way, Mia.”

My heart races as I search his eyes for answers I don’t know how to ask for. But there’s no time to linger in the moment.

Bianca is the first to rush toward us, practically vibrating with excitement. “Mia!” she squeals, throwing her arms around me. “You’re a Marcelli now! Oh my God, this is the most romantic thing I’ve ever seen.”

She pulls back just enough to glance at Carlito, her expression playful. “You’ve officially outdone yourself, Dad.”

Carlito smirks faintly, but his attention stays on me. “Thank you, Bianca,” he says, his voice carrying a note of quiet amusement.

The next moments blur into a series of congratulations, hugs, and champagne toasts. Guests circle us, their words overlapping in a cacophony of well-wishes. I try to smile and nod, but my mind feels like it’s spinning.

Carlito never leaves my side. His hand remains at the small of my back, his presence steady and unshakable. It should feel comforting, but it only adds to the weight pressing on my chest.

Eventually, the crowd begins to thin, the energy of the terrace softening as the night wears on. Carlito turns to the remaining guests, raising a hand in a silent gesture. “That’s enough for tonight,” he says, his voice calm but commanding.

The guests disperse without hesitation, leaving the terrace quieter than it’s been all evening. The city lights twinkle in the distance, their glow casting a golden hue over

the space.

Carlito turns back to me, his hand lifting mine to his lips. The gesture is slow, deliberate, and strangely intimate. My breath hitches at the unexpected tenderness in his touch.

“We’re not done yet,” he says softly, his voice almost a whisper.

I blink up at him, the weight of his words settling over me. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see,” he replies, his tone enigmatic but laced with promise.

He begins to lead me away from the terrace, his grip on my hand firm but not forceful. I follow, my steps unsteady as we move toward the stairs.

As we descend, the lively hum of the terrace fades into the quieter, more intimate stillness of the hotel’s upper corridors. Each step heightens the storm of emotions swirling inside me—excitement, fear, and something I can’t yet name.

My gaze drops to my hand, where two rings now rest—the bold diamond of the engagement ring and the delicate band from the wedding. Together, they glitter in the faint light, a promise and a commitment.

What have I just gotten myself into?



### Chapter 14

#### Carlito

The door to the suite clicks shut behind us, muffling the world outside. The noise of the gala, the applause, and the cheers from the terrace fade away like a distant echo, leaving only the quiet hum of the room and the sound of Mia's breath.

She stands just inside the doorway, her fingers brushing the fabric of her dress as though steadying herself. Her hazel eyes dart around the suite, taking in the plush furnishings, the glint of crystal chandeliers, and the wide glass doors leading to a private balcony overlooking the Strip.

"It's beautiful," she says softly, her voice tinged with exhaustion.

"It's yours," I reply, my tone deliberate. "Tonight, and whenever you need it."

Her gaze snaps to me, a flicker of surprise crossing her face. She looks like she wants to respond, but instead, she steps further into the room, letting her fingers graze the edge of the marble countertop in the open-plan kitchen.

I watch her carefully. Mia isn't like anyone I've ever known. She's standing here, newly my wife, and yet I can see the storm behind her calm facade. A mixture of confusion, excitement, and something I can't quite pin down.

"Are you all right?" I ask, crossing the room to stand beside her.

She hesitates, then nods, her fingers brushing the platinum band on her finger. “It’s just... a lot to take in. I didn’t expect—” She breaks off, shaking her head.

I take her hand in mine, lifting it gently so the rings catch the light. The engagement ring, bold and intricate, sits beside the simpler band from the ceremony. Together, they look right on her.

“Mia,” I say quietly, tilting her chin so her eyes meet mine. “I know this isn’t how you imagined tonight. I know it’s a whirlwind, and I’ve put you in the center of it. But I need you to hear this: you have nothing to fear. I will protect you. Always.”

Her breath hitches, her gaze searching mine. “Why me?” she whispers. “Out of everyone, why would you want... this?”

I let her words hang in the air for a moment, considering how to respond. She deserves honesty, but not the full truth. Not yet.

“Because you’re different,” I say finally. “You’re not like the people I surround myself with every day. You see the world as it could be, not just as it is. That’s something I never realized I needed until I met you.”

She looks at me like she wants to believe me, but doubt still lingers in her eyes. I can’t blame her. Trust doesn’t come easily, and I’ve done little to earn hers beyond words.

“Carlito,” she begins, her tone hesitant. “This... us... it feels bigger than me. Like I’ve stepped into something I don’t understand.”

“You have,” I admit, my voice soft but firm. “But you’re stronger than you know, Mia. And I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The room feels heavier now, the weight of what I'm saying settling over both of us. She nods slowly, her lips pressing together as she considers my words.

"I'll try to trust you," she says finally, her voice almost a whisper.

I step closer, my hand resting lightly against her cheek. "That's all I ask."

Mia searches my eyes, her hesitation slowly giving way to something else. Trust, maybe. Or at least the first thread of it. Her lips part slightly as if to speak, but no words come.

I let my hand linger against her cheek, the warmth of her skin grounding me in a way I hadn't expected. She leans into my touch, just barely, and that small movement sends a rush of something fierce through me.

"Mia," I murmur, her name tasting unfamiliar on my lips in this moment, heavy with a need I can't ignore any longer.

Her lashes flutter as she blinks up at me, her breath catching. "Carlito..."

Before she can say more, I close the space between us, my lips brushing hers with a gentleness that surprises even me. She freezes for a heartbeat, then softens, her hand rising to rest against my chest. The contact ignites something deep and raw, unraveling the restraint I've been holding onto all night.

I deepen the kiss, my hand sliding to the nape of her neck, holding her to me as I claim her mouth. She doesn't pull away. Instead, she tilts her head, her lips parting for me as her fingers curl into the fabric of my jacket.

Every thought, every calculated plan I've ever made fades into the background. It's just her—the way she fits against me, the way her breath hitches as my hands skim

her waist.

I guide her backward slowly, toward the plush sofa in the center of the suite. Her legs bump against it, and I break the kiss long enough to lift her into my arms. She gasps softly, her hands gripping my shoulders, but she doesn't protest.

"Mia," I say again, her name a growl now, filled with every ounce of the hunger and need I've been holding back. "Say yes to me. Not just to the rings, not just to the promises. To this . To us."

I lower her back onto her feet, while my hands begin to wander, tracing the delicate lines of her body through the soft fabric of her dress. I feel her tense slightly, but then she relaxes into my touch, her head tilting back to expose the graceful line of her neck.

"Carlito," she breathes, her voice laced with a mixture of surrender and desire.

I nuzzle her neck, my lips brushing against her sensitive skin, sending shivers down her spine. "You're mine now, Mia. And I plan to show you just how much I cherish that fact."

With that, I begin to unbutton her dress, my fingers deftly working the tiny fasteners. The fabric slides from her shoulders, baring her creamy skin, and I can't help but admire the beauty before me. Her breasts, full and inviting, rise and fall with her quickening breath.

"You're exquisite," I murmur, my lips trailing down her neck, across her collarbone, and finally, to the peak of her breast. I take the taut nipple into my mouth, suckling gently, while my hand cups its twin, eliciting a soft moan from her.

Mia's hands find their way into my hair, her fingers tangling in the dark locks as she

arches into my touch. "Oh, Carlito... please..."

I smile against her skin, my breath hot on her sensitive flesh. "Please what, my Mia? Tell me what you want."

"I want..." She hesitates, her eyes fluttering shut as my hand continues its exploration, sliding down her waist, over the curve of her hip, and finally, between her thighs. "I want you. All of you."

I nip at her earlobe, my voice a growl in her ear. "Then you shall have me. Every inch of me, devoted to your pleasure."

With that, I lift her into my arms again, her legs instinctively wrapping around my waist. She is light as a feather, as I lay her down gently on the sofa. The plush cushions envelop her, and I stand for a moment, taking in the sight of her, sprawled out before me, a feast for my hungry eyes.

Mia's eyes, now dark with desire, lock with mine. "Make love to me, Carlito. Show me what this marriage means to you."

I don't need further invitation. I shed my jacket and tie, revealing a tailored shirt that strains against my broad shoulders. Kneeling between her legs, I lean down, capturing her lips in a searing kiss. Our tongues dance, a sensual battle of wills, as I claim her mouth with a ferocity that matches the passion building within me.

My hands roam her body, mapping every curve, every dip, and every hollow. I want to memorize her, to brand her into my memory. My fingers find the waistband of her panties, and with a gentle tug, I slide them down her legs, baring her completely to my gaze.

Mia's cheeks flush a deep rose, but she makes no move to cover herself. Instead, she

reaches for me, her hands pulling at my shirt, eager to feel the heat of my skin against hers. I oblige, shedding the remaining barriers between us, until we are both naked, our bodies flush against each other.

"You're beautiful," she whispers, her fingers tracing the contours of my chest, the hard planes of my abdomen, and finally, the rigid length of my erection.

I groan, the sound raw and primal, as her touch ignites a fire within me. "So are you, Mia. So incredibly beautiful."

Positioning myself between her thighs, I guide my hardness to her entrance, pausing for a moment to revel in the anticipation. "Tell me, Mia, do you want this? Do you want me inside you?"

Her eyes flutter open, a mixture of passion and vulnerability in their depths. "Yes, Carlito. I want you. I want all of you."

With that, I thrust forward, filling her in one smooth motion. She gasps, her body adjusting to my invasion. I hold still, giving her a moment to acclimate to the sensation, but soon, her hips begin to move, urging me to continue.

I set a slow, torturous pace, withdrawing almost completely before slamming back into her, over and over. Each thrust elicits a chorus of moans and gasps from her, her body arching to meet mine, her nails digging into my shoulders.

"Harder, Carlito," she pleads, her voice hoarse with need. "Please, I want to feel you, all of you."

I oblige, my restraint shattering as I pound into her, my hips meeting hers with a force that sends the sofa creaking. Mia's cries fill the room, a symphony of pleasure that spurs me on. I want to brand her, to mark her as mine, and I know in this moment, I

am doing just that.

Her climax nears, her body tenses, her inner walls clenching around me. "I'm close, Carlito! Oh God, I'm so close!"

"Let go, Mia," I urge, my voice hoarse. "Come for me. Show me how much you want this."

Her release hits her like a wave, her body convulsing around me, her nails digging into my back as she cries out my name. The sensation is enough to push me over the edge, and I thrust one final time, burying myself deep within her as my own orgasm claims me.

We lie there, entangled in each other's arms, our hearts pounding in unison. I kiss her forehead, her cheeks, and finally, her lips, a tender contrast to the ferocity of our lovemaking.

"Mia," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. "You are everything I never knew I needed. And I promise, I will spend the rest of my life showing you just how much you mean to me."

She smiles, her eyes heavy with contentment. "I believe you, Carlito. And I can't wait to see what the future holds for us."

The room falls silent once more, the only sound our steady breathing. Mia's eyes drift shut, her body relaxing into the cushions as she succumbs to sleep. I watch her, studying the peaceful expression on her face, the way her chest rises and falls in gentle rhythm.

The storm of emotions that shadowed her earlier has melted away, replaced by a calm that stirs something deep in me.

I brush a strand of hair away from her face, my fingers lingering for a moment longer than necessary. She shifts slightly but doesn't wake, her trust in me evident even now.

It's in this quiet, stolen moment that the weight of my choices presses down on me. Marrying Mia wasn't just about status and strategy—it was about something I didn't expect, something I'm still struggling to name. She's changed everything, disrupted the carefully constructed life I've built.

I never planned for this. Never planned for her .

And yet, here she is, my wife.

I glance at her hand resting against the cushion, the platinum wedding band catching the light. It's a symbol, a bond, but it's also a promise I've made to protect her at all costs.

No matter what happens next, she's mine to protect now.



### Chapter 15

Mia

The golden light of mid-morning floods The Venetian Rooftop Terrace, warming the polished tiles and making the champagne glasses glint like diamonds. The hum of laughter and conversation blends with soft background music, creating an atmosphere of easy celebration.

It's hard to believe that just hours ago, I was in the quiet cocoon of Carlito's suite, my mind and body consumed by him. That world of intimacy feels distant now, replaced by the bustling energy of a rooftop filled with elegantly dressed guests and endless toasts.

Bianca finds me near the edge of the terrace, her emerald-green dress catching the sunlight as she practically skips toward me. "There you are, Mrs. Marcelli!" she exclaims, grabbing my hands with an exuberant smile. "You're glowing. Married life already looks good on you."

Her excitement is contagious, and despite the whirlwind still spinning in my mind, I can't help but laugh. "I think I'm still trying to process it all," I admit, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"Well, get used to it," she teases, her grin widening. "I bet my dad's already planning to whisk you off to some remote villa for the next week."

My gaze drifts across the terrace to Carlito, who stands near the far edge, deep in

conversation with Leo. Even from a distance, his presence commands attention. His broad shoulders, perfectly tailored suit, and the deliberate way he scans the crowd are all impossible to miss.

He senses me watching and glances over, a faint smile tugging at his lips. It's the kind of smile that carries weight—a subtle reminder of last night, of everything we said and didn't say.

Bianca follows my gaze and nudges me playfully. “He can't take his eyes off you, can he?”

I shake my head, but my cheeks warm. “He's probably just making sure I haven't run off,” I joke, though there's a kernel of truth beneath the words.

“Oh, please,” she scoffs. “You're the best thing that's ever happened to him. Trust me, I've never seen my dad like this.”

Her words send a flutter through me, a mix of pride and uncertainty.

Before I can respond, she loops her arm through mine. “Come on, Dario wants to say hi. He's been waiting for a chance to talk to you.”

We weave through the crowd, Bianca chattering animatedly as I offer polite nods and smiles to the guests we pass. When we reach Dario, he greets me with an easy grin, his warmth immediately putting me at ease.

Dario is Bianca's fiancé, a constant presence in Carlito's companies and someone who feels like a steadying force in this world I'm still trying to navigate. He works for Carlito—not just as Bianca's partner, but as a trusted manager.

“You must be the star of the hour,” Dario says, shaking my hand. His tone is light,

but there's genuine kindness in his expression.

"I think that title belongs to Carlito," I reply with a small laugh, glancing toward where Carlito still stands.

"Carlito's the star of every hour," Dario says with a chuckle, his grin widening. He exchanges a quick look with Bianca, the affection between them clear. "But seriously, Mia—it's good to see you settling in. I know this world can be... intense."

"That's one word for it," I say, though my tone is more playful than serious.

Bianca's laughter rings out beside me, and for a moment, I let myself relax. The tension from earlier melts away, replaced by the lightness of their company.

But then it happens.

The shift is subtle at first—a prickling at the back of my neck, a sensation that something isn't quite right. I glance around, my laughter fading as unease creeps in. Across the terrace, near the far edge, I see him.

The stranger who confronted me days ago.

He's dressed like any other guest, but everything about him feels out of place—the stiffness in his stance, the sharpness of his gaze.

My stomach drops as recognition dawns.

He doesn't move much, but his eyes are scanning the crowd, sharp and deliberate. My pulse quickens, the familiar unease from our last encounter coiling tightly in my chest.

“Mia?” Bianca’s voice pulls me back, her hand brushing my arm. “You okay?”

I force a smile, though it feels thin. “I’m fine,” I say quickly, trying to steady my voice. “Just thought I saw someone I recognized.”

Her gaze follows mine briefly, but the crowd is too thick for her to notice him. “You sure?” she asks, her brows knitting together in concern.

“Yeah,” I reply, though my stomach twists. “It’s nothing.”

I glance back toward the man, but now he’s moving, weaving through the clusters of guests with unsettling purpose. My chest tightens further as his hand shifts under his jacket. A flash of metal catches the light, and realization slams into me like a tidal wave.

“Get down!” I cry, grabbing Bianca’s arm and pulling her toward me just as a deafening crack splits the air.

The world seems to shatter. Screams erupt around us, and glasses crash to the ground as guests scatter in panic. My ears ring from the sound of the gunshot, my heart racing as chaos explodes across the terrace.

Before I can fully process what’s happening, a figure barrels toward me. It’s Dario, his expression set with grim determination. He grabs Bianca and me, shoving us both down behind a table.

“Stay down!” he barks, his voice sharp but protective.

Another shot rings out, closer this time. I clutch Bianca tightly, my body trembling as I hear the unmistakable sound of more chaos erupting.

“Dario!” Bianca’s voice is panicked, and she reaches for him as he moves to shield us.

It all happens so fast. A third shot fires, and I see Dario jerk backward, his eyes widening in shock before he collapses.

“No!” Bianca screams, her voice raw and broken as she lunges toward him.

My breath catches, my body frozen as I stare at the crimson staining Dario’s shirt. He’s sprawled on the ground, his chest heaving with shallow breaths as Bianca sobs beside him.

Carlito’s voice cuts through the chaos, sharp and commanding. “Get her out of here!”

Leo is suddenly at my side, his grip firm as he pulls me to my feet. “Move!” he orders, dragging me toward the terrace exit. I resist, my eyes darting back to Bianca, who’s cradling Dario’s head in her lap, tears streaming down her face.

“I can’t leave her!” I cry, struggling against Leo’s hold.

“She’s safe with him,” Leo says through gritted teeth, nodding toward Carlito, who’s already moving to shield Bianca. “You’re the target!”

The weight of his words sinks in as I’m ushered away, my heart pounding in my ears. Over Leo’s shoulder, I catch a glimpse of the stranger disappearing into the chaos, his face etched with grim satisfaction.

The elevator doors close with a soft chime, silencing the cacophony of screams and shattered glass from the terrace. My chest heaves as I struggle to catch my breath, my hands shaking uncontrollably.

“Who was that?” I manage to ask, my voice trembling as I look up at Leo. “Why was he after me?”

Leo doesn’t answer right away. His jaw is tight, his eyes sharp as he scans the suite we’ve entered for any potential threats. Only when he’s satisfied that the room is secure does he turn to face me.

“We don’t know,” he says, his tone clipped. “But it’s clear now—this wasn’t random. You were the target.”

The words hit me like a blow, and I sink onto the nearest chair, my knees barely able to hold me up. My mind spins, replaying the moment I recognized the man, the flash of metal, the sound of the gunfire.

“And Dario...” My voice cracks.

Leo’s expression hardens, a flicker of regret passing through his eyes. “He was trying to protect Bianca and you. He did what needed to be done.”

A sob rises in my throat, but I choke it back, pressing a hand to my mouth as the weight of the situation crashes over me. Dario is gone because of me.

Before I can spiral further, the suite door bursts open, and Carlito strides in. His presence fills the room instantly, his dark eyes blazing with fury and something deeper—fear.

“Mia,” he says, crossing to me in a few swift steps. His hands cup my face, his gaze searching mine. “Are you hurt?”

I shake my head, tears slipping down my cheeks. “No, but Dario... Carlito, he—”

“I know,” Carlito says, his voice low and rough. “Bianca’s with him. She’s safe. That’s what matters right now.”

“Safe?” I echo, my voice trembling. “Dario is dead! How is anyone safe?”

Carlito’s jaw tightens, but his hands remain steady on my face. “Listen to me, Mia. I promised to protect you, and I will. What happened out there will never happen again.”

His words are firm, but they don’t erase the guilt clawing at my chest. “That man... he’s the stranger from days ago. I think he’s been watching me, Carlito.”

Carlito’s expression darkens, his eyes narrowing. “You’re sure it was him?”

I nod, my stomach twisting. “Why would he come after me? What does he want?”

“We’ll find out,” Carlito says, his tone deadly calm. He straightens, releasing me, and turns to Leo. “Double the security around her. No one gets close without clearance.”

Leo nods sharply. “Understood.”

Carlito paces to the window, his hands clenched at his sides as he stares out at the skyline. “This changes everything. Whoever sent him just declared war.”

The gravity of his words sends a chill down my spine. War. What does he mean by war?

The pieces I’ve been trying to fit together suddenly feel bigger, darker.

“Carlito,” I say hesitantly, “do you know who might be behind this?”

He turns to me, his expression unreadable. “I have my suspicions. But right now, the only thing that matters is keeping you safe.”

I nod, though the unease in my chest doesn’t lessen.

As Carlito crosses the room and pulls me into a firm embrace, one thought takes root in my mind, impossible to ignore:

Who was that man... and why was he after me?



### Chapter 16

#### Carlito

The air in my penthouse feels heavier than ever, the hum of tension pressing against my temples. Guards are stationed at every entrance, their sharp eyes scanning for threats. The surveillance monitors blink with grainy images from across my properties, but none of it matters. My focus is here, in this room—now a war zone in its own right.

Leo stands beside me, flipping through a dossier filled with intel on Matteo Russo's latest moves. The weight of the attack still sits on my shoulders, each detail replaying in my head like a cursed loop: the gunfire ripping through the rooftop, the screams, and Dario's blood staining the floor as he shielded Mia with his body.

"We've confirmed it," Leo says, his voice pulling me out of the spiral. "Dominic Caruso was the shooter."

Dominic. My jaw tightens, and my fingers curl against the armrest of the leather chair. I force myself to breathe evenly, but inside, a storm rages. Dominic—Mia's estranged brother. The man she's barely spoken of and never seen in years. I'd considered him irrelevant. A ghost. But ghosts have a way of haunting the living.

"And Russo?" My voice is sharp, controlled, though my chest feels ready to explode.

"Dominic's working for him," Leo replies. "Likely under duress. Matteo's using him as leverage—a puppet for a bigger game. He knows what Mia means to you."

The words hit harder than they should. What Mia means to me. Matteo's move is calculated, a clear shot at the one place I've allowed myself to feel exposed. Anger rises like a tide, but I keep my face neutral. Losing control won't help.

I glance toward the living area, where Mia sits with Bianca. They huddle on the couch, grief clinging to them like a second skin. Bianca stares blankly at her hands, and Mia—my Mia—leans close, murmuring quiet reassurances. The sight of her, fragile but unyielding, pulls at something deep in me.

Leo shifts beside me. "Do you want me to tell her?"

"No," I say, sharper than I intended. I rein it in, speaking lower. "Not yet. She doesn't need this weight on her shoulders, not after what she's been through today. Keep Dominic's involvement between us for now."

Leo hesitates, his brows pulling together like he wants to argue, but he knows better. This isn't about sparing Mia's feelings. It's about protecting her focus. If she starts questioning every shadow, every ally, it will break her.

"I'll keep digging," Leo says, closing the folder. "We'll get answers."

"You'll bring them to me," I say firmly. "I'll decide how this plays out."

With a nod, Leo steps back, leaving me to stare at the living area once more. Mia's hand strokes Bianca's back, her lips moving in soft, comforting words. The sight makes my chest tighten.

I turn toward my study, where the blueprints and plans await my attention. Every step I take feels heavier than the last. Secrets pile up like weights around my neck, but some truths can do more damage than any bullet.

In the study, the air is cooler, quieter. The heavy oak desk is littered with blueprints, maps, and security reports. A steaming cup of espresso sits untouched beside a notepad filled with scribbled plans for retaliation. Every angle I analyze leads back to the same bitter truth—Matteo won't stop until I force him to.

Leo reenters, his expression grim. "There's one more thing," he says, handing me a photo.

I take it, my stomach hardening at the sight. It's a grainy still from the gala's security footage, Dominic in a dark suit, his face shadowed but unmistakable. He's holding the weapon steady, his posture screaming training and precision.

"He didn't hesitate," Leo says. "No sign of second-guessing. Whatever Matteo has on him, it's got him fully under control."

I set the photo down, leaning forward with my hands on the desk. My mind churns with possibilities. Why Dominic? What leverage does Matteo hold that could turn him into a weapon aimed at his own sister?

"Anything on why he's doing this?" I ask, keeping my tone steady.

Leo shakes his head. "Not yet. We're pulling every string we can, but Russo's good at covering his tracks." He pauses, his gaze flicking toward the closed door. "What about Mia? She'll find out eventually, Carlito. Keeping her in the dark—it's a temporary fix."

I stare at the photo, my pulse a steady thrum in my ears. "She'll find out when the time is right," I say. "Not before."

The door creaks open slightly, and I glance up to see Mia standing there, hesitant. She's wearing one of my shirts, its oversized fit swallowing her frame, but her

presence fills the room in a way that makes it impossible to look away.

“Am I interrupting?” she asks softly.

Leo straightens, closing the folder quickly. “I was just leaving,” he says, slipping past her and closing the door behind him.

Mia steps closer, her eyes searching mine. “You’ve been in here for hours,” she says. “You didn’t even eat.”

“I’ve been busy,” I reply, my voice softer than I intended.

She moves closer, her steps hesitant, as if she knows the weight of what lies unspoken between us. Her gaze falls to the desk, to the scattered plans and reports, before meeting mine again.

“Is it... safe here?” she asks finally, her voice trembling just enough to reveal the fear she’s been hiding.

“Yes,” I say firmly, standing and closing the space between us. “No one will touch you, Mia. Not here, not anywhere. I’ll make sure of it.”

Her shoulders relax slightly, but I can see the questions in her eyes, the doubts she doesn’t voice. I want to tell her everything—about Dominic, about Matteo—but the words stick in my throat.

For now, silence is my shield.

Mia reaches out, her hand brushing against mine, a small gesture that sends a wave of resolve through me. I step back to the desk, already planning the next move to ensure her safety, even if it means holding onto the secrets that threaten to fracture us.

The door clicks shut behind Mia as she returns to Bianca's side, leaving me in the stillness of the study. I exhale slowly, gripping the edge of the desk as the weight of the day bears down on me. Every instinct screams for action—for vengeance—but I know this isn't a battle I can win with brute force alone.

My phone buzzes, cutting through the silence. It's Leo again.

"What is it?" I ask, not bothering with formalities.

"There's chatter about Dominic reaching out to Mia," Leo says, his tone clipped. "We intercepted a courier—someone tried to deliver a note to her earlier today."

A chill sweeps down my spine. "What did it say?"

"Not much. Just a time and place. Looks like Dominic wants to meet her," Leo replies. "What do you want me to do?"

For a moment, I say nothing, my mind racing. Dominic's boldness confirms my worst fears—he's not just a pawn in Matteo's game; he's a variable I can't fully control. And now, he's dragging Mia into his chaos.

"Nothing for now," I say finally, though the decision sits like lead in my chest. "Let the message pass. I need to know how far he's willing to go."

Leo pauses, clearly hesitant. "You think it's a trap?"

"Doesn't matter if it is," I reply. "Dominic's too close. I need to know what he wants, and if Matteo's using him to get to Mia, we'll cut the strings before he can pull them tighter."

Leo sighs but doesn't argue. "Understood. I'll keep a close watch."

“Double the detail on Mia and Bianca,” I add. “They don’t go anywhere alone. Not even inside the penthouse.”

The call ends, and I toss the phone onto the desk, the sharp clatter breaking the silence. My gaze drifts to the photo of Dominic again, the grainy image staring back like a taunt.

The boy who grew up in Mia’s family—the boy she once trusted—has become a man I can’t afford to underestimate.

The sound of soft footsteps draws my attention. I glance up as Mia peeks into the study again, her expression uncertain. “I thought you might need this,” she says, holding a plate of food she must have brought from the kitchen.

The gesture catches me off guard, and for a moment, all the tension melts away. I step forward, taking the plate from her hands, and let my fingers brush hers in the exchange.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice softer than I expected.

She lingers for a moment, her eyes searching mine, before nodding and retreating again. The door closes behind her, and I’m alone once more, the scent of freshly cooked food mixing with the stale air of strategy and secrets.

I lower myself into the chair, setting the plate aside untouched. My appetite isn’t for food. It’s for vengeance.

Dominic’s betrayal is bad enough. But if Matteo knows what Mia means to me, this war is only beginning.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 17

Mia

The penthouse, for all its luxury, feels like a prison today. The polished marble floors and towering windows project elegance, but the tension inside makes the space suffocating. Hours have passed since Carlito locked himself in his study with Leo, leaving Bianca and me to sit in an unbearable silence.

Bianca sits curled on the couch, her knees tucked against her chest. Her gaze is distant, fixed on the untouched cup of tea I placed in front of her earlier. She hasn't spoken much since the attack.

I move to sit beside her, resting a tentative hand on her knee. "Bianca," I say softly, "let me get you something. Tea? Water?"

She shakes her head, her expression unreadable. "No," she whispers.

"You haven't eaten all day," I press. "You need—"

"I don't need anything," she snaps, her voice sharp and raw. Her head turns, and her green eyes lock onto mine. They're bloodshot, her grief spilling out in the redness around them. "What I need is for Dario to not be dead."

Her words cut like a knife, and I recoil slightly. "Bianca..."

"How can you sit here," she continues, her voice cracking, "and act like everything's

fine? How can you be so calm when we're stuck in this place, and Dario is dead, and my father refuses to tell us anything?"

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come. What could I possibly say? That she's wrong? That everything is fine?

"I'm not calm," I manage eventually. "I'm trying to figure things out, Bianca. Just like you."

She lets out a bitter laugh, one that doesn't reach her eyes. "Figure it out faster, Mia. Because if you don't, we're both going to end up like him."

Her words hit like a slap, but it's what she says next that truly stings.

"My father's arrogance—it ruins everything," she spits. "Sometimes I wish I had a different one."

Before I can respond, she stands abruptly and storms down the hall. A door slams, the sound reverberating through the penthouse like a gunshot.

I sit frozen on the couch, her words ringing in my ears.

Sometimes I wish I had a different one.

It's a cruel statement, born of grief, but it sticks with me as I stare at the empty space she left behind. My parents' faces flash in my mind, unbidden. My father's strong, calloused hands guiding me as a child. My mother's warm smile as she pulled me into her arms. They weren't perfect, but they were good, honest people.

Or so I thought.



Now, doubt creeps in like a shadow. Would they have made the same choices Carlito has? Would they have kept secrets, justified it as protection? The thought twists in my chest, an ache I can't shake.

I glance toward the hallway, my gaze landing on the door to Carlito's study. It's slightly ajar, a crack of light spilling into the corridor. My pulse quickens.

"Carlito?" I call softly, taking a hesitant step forward.

No answer.

The door creaks as I push it open, revealing an empty room. The faint scent of Carlito's cologne lingers, mixing with the leather and paper of his study. The desk is cluttered, an uncharacteristic mess of folders, documents, and files.

One folder catches my eye, marked with bold black initials: "M.R." My hand trembles as I reach for it, curiosity pulling me forward.

The folder feels heavier than it should, the weight of its contents pressing against my palms. I know I shouldn't be snooping—it's not like Carlito left this out for me to see—but something compels me to open it.

Inside, the first page is a list of properties. Most of the addresses and names mean nothing to me, but one stands out: Matteo Russo.

My breath catches. Matteo Russo. The name repeats in my mind, unfamiliar yet tinged with something ominous.

I scan the page for context, but it offers none. My fingers skim through the rest of the folder, turning pages quickly as my pulse races. Each document feels more cryptic than the last: financial records, timelines, and what look like surveillance reports, all

connected to Matteo Russo.

Who is he?

I pause on a page where Leo's sharp handwriting stands out in the margins, phrases like "escalating conflict" and "potential retaliation" scrawled in bold strokes. My stomach tightens. Is Russo one of Carlito's business rivals?

That's what it has to be, I tell myself. Carlito has always maintained he's a legitimate businessman—powerful, yes, but above board. If Russo is tied to these files, it must be because of some corporate dispute.

But then why does everything about this feel so much darker?

I turn another page and freeze. It's a photocopy of what looks like a deed, the name "Matteo Russo" bold and unmistakable. The property address listed doesn't ring any bells, but a scribbled note beneath it makes my pulse spike: Under close surveillance. High risk.

"High risk," I whisper to myself. What does that mean?

Footsteps echo in the hallway, pulling me out of my thoughts. My head snaps up, and I shove the folder back onto the desk. My heart pounds as the footsteps grow louder, each one like a drumbeat in my ears.

The door creaks open, and Carlito steps inside. His sharp gaze sweeps over the room, landing on me. His expression is unreadable, but the tension in his shoulders is hard to miss.

"What are you doing in here?" His voice is calm, but there's an edge to it that sends a chill down my spine.

“I... I was looking for you,” I say quickly, trying to sound casual.

He doesn’t move, his eyes flicking briefly to the desk. For a moment, the air between us feels charged, like he’s weighing whether to press further.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” he says finally, his tone softening just enough to ease some of the tension. “Go back to the living room Mia, now. I’ll join you soon.”

I hesitate, searching his face for any sign of what he’s thinking. There’s nothing—just the same calm, controlled exterior I’ve come to expect. Reluctantly, I nod and slip past him, my hands trembling as I step out of the study.

Back in the living room, I collapse onto the couch, clutching my knees to my chest. The name Matteo Russo echoes in my mind, louder now, insistent. If Carlito won’t tell me who he is, I’ll have to find out myself.

I sit, clutching my knees, the weight of everything pressing down on me. My head swims with questions I don’t have answers to, each one circling back to the same thing: Matteo Russo.

Who is he? And why does his name feel like the thread that unravels everything I thought I knew?

Bianca’s words from earlier replay in my mind, stinging more now than they did before. “My father’s arrogance—it ruins everything.”

I can’t help but wonder. Was my father like that too? Arrogant? Reckless? Could his decisions have put us in danger, even now?

It’s an uncomfortable thought, one I’ve never let myself entertain before. My father was a good man, a hardworking man who built his small construction company from

the ground up. He wasn't a risk-taker or someone who dealt in secrets—at least, that's what I've always believed.

But the longer I sit here, the more those beliefs feel like sand slipping through my fingers.

I pull my knees tighter to my chest, staring blankly at the window. Outside, the Las Vegas Strip glitters in the distance, its bright lights a sharp contrast to the darkness I feel creeping in.

The sound of footsteps pulls me from my thoughts. Carlito appears in the hallway, his suit jacket off and his tie loosened. He looks as tired as I feel, but his expression remains unreadable.

He steps into the room, his gaze settling on me. "You should get some rest," he says, his voice softer than it was in the study.

"I'm fine," I reply, though my tone comes out sharper than I intended.

His brows knit together, and he steps closer. "Mia, I know this has been a lot, but you need to trust me. I'm handling it."

"Handling what?" I ask, standing abruptly. "Because from my point of view, it feels like you're keeping me in the dark, Carlito. You don't tell me anything, and I'm supposed to just... trust that you'll fix it all?"

His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I see something flicker in his eyes—guilt, maybe, or hesitation. "I'm keeping you safe," he says, his voice firm. "That's all that matters."

"But safe from what?" I press, my frustration boiling over. "From the things you're

keeping from me? From whatever mess you're caught up in? I deserve to know the truth, Carlito."

He steps closer, his dark eyes locking onto mine. "You'll know the truth when you need to."

The words hang between us like a challenge, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I exhale shakily, the fight draining out of me as I turn away. "Good night, Carlito," I say quietly, retreating toward the bedroom.

As I close the door behind me, my mind is a storm of unanswered questions. The name Matteo Russo is burned into my thoughts now, demanding answers I'm not sure I want to find.

I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at the note I swiped from the folder before Carlito returned. My father's name is scrawled in the corner, along with the words: Unfinished business.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:09 pm*

### Chapter 18

#### Carlito

The morning sun streams through the penthouse's towering windows, but its warmth feels hollow. Every light in the room only sharpens the tension hanging in the air. I sit at the long dining table, staring at the reports Leo dropped off an hour ago.

Each page is worse than the last. Matteo Russo's reach extends farther than I expected. His latest moves aren't just about power—they're calculated, aimed directly at me. And at Mia.

The file in front of me confirms it: a detailed plan to target a property tied to Mia's inheritance. I'd hoped it was coincidence, that Matteo hadn't realized its connection to her. But the notes scrawled in the margins prove otherwise.

"High value. Leverage."

My grip tightens on the paper. The implications are clear. Matteo doesn't just know about Mia; he intends to use her inheritance as a weapon.

Leo steps into the room, breaking my thoughts. "We need to move fast," he says, his voice low but steady. "If Russo hits that property, it'll be a bloodbath. He's sending a message."

I nod, setting the papers down. "Reinforce the guard detail. I want eyes on Mia and Bianca at all times. No one gets near them."

Leo hesitates, glancing toward the hallway where the bedrooms are. “You sure about keeping Mia in the dark?”

My jaw tightens. “She doesn’t need to know.”

“Carlito,” Leo says cautiously, “she’s not stupid. She knows something’s going on.”

I glare at him, but he holds his ground. He’s not wrong. Mia’s been distant since last night, her questions sharper, her silences louder.

“Let me handle it,” I say finally, my tone leaving no room for argument.

Leo nods and leaves, but his words linger. Mia isn’t stupid. And I’m running out of ways to shield her from the truth.

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The sound of heels clicking across the floor pulls my attention. I turn to see Bianca stride into the living room, her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

“What now?” she snaps, her voice sharp enough to cut glass.

“Good morning to you too, Bianca,” I say, keeping my tone measured.

She stops short, glaring at me. “Don’t act like everything’s fine. It’s not fine, Dad. Dario’s dead, and we’re stuck here like prisoners while you decide everything for us.”

Her words hang heavy in the air, and I can feel the grief and frustration radiating off her. “The funeral arrangements have already been made,” I reply evenly. “It will be small and private. I won’t risk another incident, not after what happened.”

She scoffs, her arms tightening across her chest. “Small? Private? You mean rushed and hidden. You didn’t even let Mia attend! Dario would have wanted her there.”

The bitterness in her voice stings, but I keep my tone calm. “Mia’s safety is my priority, Bianca. Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I don’t feel the weight of what’s happened?”

Her glare hardens. “I think you’re using safety as an excuse to control everything. You always make the decisions, and the rest of us just have to fall in line. It’s not fair, Daddy.”

I step closer, my voice lowering. “Nothing about this is fair, Bianca. I lost Dario too. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure no one else pays that price—not you, and not Mia.”

Her lip trembles, but she doesn’t back down. “Maybe if you stopped treating everyone like pawns in whatever game you’re playing, we wouldn’t have had to pay that price in the first place.”

I open my mouth to respond, but she’s already turning away. Her heels click against the marble as she storms down the hallway, her door slamming shut behind her.

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The cool morning air greets me as I step onto the balcony. Mia stands at the edge, her hands gripping the railing as she stares out at the skyline. The view is breathtaking—the sprawling expanse of Las Vegas glittering under the rising sun—but there’s no light in her expression.

“Mia,” I say softly, careful not to startle her.



She doesn't turn, her shoulders stiff. "What's going on, Carlito?"

Her voice is calm, but the weight of her words is anything but.

I walk closer, stopping just a few steps behind her. "I don't know what you mean."

She lets out a bitter laugh, the sound cutting through the quiet. "Don't do that," she says, finally turning to face me. Her hazel eyes burn with frustration. "Don't pretend everything's normal when it's not. Dario is dead. Bianca's falling apart. And you're... you're so distant. It's like you're holding the world on your shoulders, and I'm just supposed to sit here and ignore it."

I meet her gaze, the urge to tell her everything rising in my chest. But I push it down. "I'm trying to protect you," I say, the words coming out harsher than I intended.

"Protect me?" she repeats, her voice rising. "From what, Carlito? From who? You keep saying that, but you don't tell me anything. How am I supposed to trust you when you won't even let me in?"

Her words sting because they're true.

I step closer, my hand reaching for hers. She doesn't pull away, but she doesn't relax either. "Mia," I say, my tone softening, "there are things I can't tell you. Not yet. But everything I'm doing is for you. For Bianca. For us."

"Do you even hear yourself?" she snaps, yanking her hand away. "You sound like you're reading from a script. How do I know you're not just... lying to me?"

The accusation hits harder than Bianca's earlier outburst. I close the distance between us, my hands landing on her shoulders. "I would never lie to you," I say, my voice low and firm. "I can't give you answers right now, but you have to trust me."

Her eyes search mine, and for a moment, I think she might relent. But then she shakes her head, her frustration boiling over. “I don’t know if I can,” she whispers.

The words hang between us, heavy and suffocating. I feel something snap inside me—a mix of anger, guilt, and desperation. Before I can stop myself, I tilt her chin up and capture her lips with mine.

The kiss is rough, fueled by the storm raging inside both of us. She resists at first, her hands pressing against my chest as if to push me away. But then something shifts. Her resistance melts into heat, her fingers clutching the fabric of my shirt as she pulls me closer.

The intensity between us builds, the argument forgotten as our emotions spill over. But even as the moment deepens, I know this connection can’t erase the secrets still standing between us.

The world narrows to the space between us. Her fingers clutch my shirt, her body pressed close to mine as if trying to bridge the gap our words couldn’t. For a fleeting moment, everything else falls away—the danger, the lies, the weight of what I’m keeping from her.

But reality crashes back too quickly.

Mia pulls away first, her breathing heavy, her lips swollen from the kiss. She takes a step back, her arms wrapping around herself as if to shield her emotions from me. “This doesn’t fix anything,” she says, her voice trembling.

“I know,” I admit, my own voice low.

She looks at me, her hazel eyes glassy with unshed tears. “I just... I don’t know how to do this, Carlito. How am I supposed to trust you when it feels like you’re always

hiding something?”

Her question pierces through me, leaving me at a loss for words.

Before I can respond, the sound of my phone vibrating on the table inside interrupts us. The sharp noise is like a bucket of cold water poured over the moment, and Mia turns away, walking back into the penthouse without another word.

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I follow her inside, watching as she disappears down the hallway toward the bedrooms. My phone continues to buzz, dragging me back into the present.

I pick it up, the name on the screen instantly sharpening my focus: Leo.

“What is it?” I answer, my voice clipped.

“We’ve got a problem,” Leo says without preamble. “Russo’s crew is making moves near the property tied to Mia’s inheritance. I think they’re testing our defenses, but it’s only a matter of time before they escalate.”

A curse slips from my lips. “Double the security detail. I want eyes on every inch of that property.”

“Already on it,” Leo replies. There’s a pause, then his tone softens. “How’s Mia holding up?”

I glance toward the hallway, where the sound of a door closing tells me she’s shut herself in her room. “She’s... frustrated,” I admit. “And she’s starting to ask questions I can’t answer yet.”

“Carlito,” Leo says cautiously, “you can’t keep her in the dark forever. She’s smart. If you don’t tell her the truth, someone else will.”

I clench my jaw, the weight of his words settling heavily on my shoulders. “I’ll handle it,” I say firmly, though the knot in my chest tightens.

Leo hesitates, then sighs. “Just don’t wait too long. Russo’s playing a long game, and Mia’s at the center of it. She deserves to know what’s at stake.”

The call ends, but the tension remains.

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That night, I sit in the armchair near the window, watching Mia as she sleeps. Her features are soft in the glow of the city lights, but a crease mars her brow, even in rest.

She doesn’t know the full extent of the danger she’s in, and it’s my fault. My decision to keep her in the dark is meant to protect her, but now I wonder if it’s only pushing her further away.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees as a single thought burns in my mind:

She’s mine to protect. But how do I keep her safe from a war she doesn’t even know she’s in?

Leo updates me that Russo’s crew is making bolder moves, setting the stage for an inevitable confrontation that could expose everything.

### Chapter 19

Mia

The penthouse feels like a maze of secrets, each room holding something Carlito doesn't want me to see. After he left for a meeting with Leo late this morning, I found myself drawn back to his study.

The door had been left unlocked, and I told myself I wasn't snooping—I was just... trying to understand.

Now, hours later, I'm sitting at his desk with the pile of documents spread out in front of me. The folder I found last night lies open, its contents arranged like a puzzle I don't know how to solve. My hands tremble as I pick up one of the letters again, my father's familiar signature glaring up at me.

Richard Caruso.

I trace the ink, the name Matteo Russo leaping off the page like a curse. This isn't just business correspondence—it's a warning. My father's carefully worded letter discusses a property dispute, calling it a "delicate matter" that needs "immediate resolution."

I flip to another page, my mother's handwriting scrawled in hurried lines: "Richard, I don't trust him. Be careful."

My chest tightens as I stare at the words. My parents—my loving, ordinary

parents—weren't ordinary at all. They were involved in something dangerous, something they tried to shield me from my entire life.

The wave of nausea hits again, sharp and sudden. I press a hand to my stomach, trying to steady myself. It's been happening for days now—this strange, uneasy feeling that I keep blaming on stress.

I shake it off and return to the papers, desperate for answers. The documents detail financial transactions, property deeds, and a tangled web of correspondence between my parents and Matteo Russo. But the pieces don't quite fit together, leaving more questions than answers.

The faint creak of a door makes me jump. My heart pounds as Carlito steps into the study, his dark eyes narrowing when they land on the scattered papers.

"What are you doing?" he asks, his tone calm but edged with suspicion.

I freeze, my hands hovering over the documents. "I was just—" I start, but the words catch in my throat. "I needed to know more. About them. About what's happening."

Carlito's gaze sharpens, his expression unreadable as he steps closer. "You shouldn't be going through those," he says, his voice low.

"Why not?" I counter, standing to meet his gaze. "They're my parents. This is my inheritance. I have a right to know what's going on."

His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he's going to tell me the truth. But then he shakes his head, his expression hardening. "This isn't something you need to worry about."

I laugh bitterly, the sound cutting through the tense air. "Don't patronize me, Carlito.

My family's past is tied to this, and now it's putting all of us in danger. I deserve to know."

"Mia," he says softly, his tone almost pleading. "I'm trying to protect you."

"Protect me from what?" I snap. "From who? Matteo Russo? Your rivals? The truth?"

His silence speaks volumes, and my frustration boils over. "I can't keep living like this," I say, my voice trembling. "I can't keep wondering what's real and what you're hiding from me."

Carlito exhales sharply, his shoulders slumping slightly as he runs a hand through his hair. "Mia, do you know what time it is? Try go get some rest," he says finally, his voice weary. "We'll talk about this tomorrow morning"

He turns and leaves before I can respond, the door clicking shut behind him.

As the silence settles, my phone buzzes on the desk. I glance down to see an unfamiliar number and a message that sends a chill through me: "You're closer to the truth than you realize. I can tell you everything."

I stare at the message, my thumb hovering over the screen. The words feel like a threat and a promise all at once, their weight pressing heavily against my chest. You're closer to the truth than you realize. What truth? And who is this person claiming they can give it to me?

The number is untraceable—no name, no context. Just the message, stark and haunting against the glow of the phone.

I glance toward the closed door, Carlito's words still ringing in my ears: "Go get

some rest.” But rest feels impossible now. The pieces of the puzzle are scattered before me, and I’m desperate to make them fit.

The message is vague, but its timing is too precise to ignore. It’s as if this person—whoever they are—knew exactly when to reach me. Could it be the same man Carlito’s been trying to shield me from? The one behind Dario’s death?

A second message appears, the screen lighting up again:

“I know what Carlito won’t tell you. About your family. About Dario. About the property.”

My blood turns cold. Whoever this is, they know far more than they should. The mention of Dario twists the knife in my chest. Bianca’s raw grief, Carlito’s stony silence—both feel sharper now, more fragile.

I press the phone to my chest, trying to steady my breathing. There’s no way this message could have gotten through Carlito’s security—not without help. My thoughts race as I consider the possibilities. Could someone on the inside have passed it along? Or did they exploit a crack in the system, slipping through Carlito’s ironclad defenses?

The idea terrifies me. If they can reach me this easily, what else are they capable of?

I glance at the papers on the desk again, the name Matteo Russo taunting me from the page. The same name Carlito refuses to explain, the same man whose presence seems to hang like a shadow over everything that’s happened.

My phone buzzes a third time, and the message is shorter, more direct:

“You can’t trust him.”



My breath catches, and I slam the phone down on the desk. The accusation feels like a slap, and yet, deep down, I know I've already been questioning Carlito for days. His refusal to let me in, his cryptic answers, the way he looks at me as if he's carrying a burden I'm not allowed to share—it all adds up to something I can't ignore.

But can I trust the person sending these messages?

I stand and pace the room, my thoughts tangled in a web of fear and frustration. Carlito says he's protecting me, but from what? And at what cost?

The phone buzzes again, but this time, I don't look. I can't. My head feels too heavy, my chest too tight. The nausea returns, sharper than before, and I press a hand to my stomach, willing it to pass.

I sink back into the chair, staring at the scattered documents as the phone continues to vibrate insistently. I know I'll have to make a decision soon. But right now, all I can do is try to breathe.

The messages stop, but their weight lingers. My thoughts are a storm of questions and doubts as I hear footsteps approaching the door again. It's Carlito again—and he doesn't look happy.

The door creaks open, and Carlito steps inside. His eyes sweep over the room, landing on the scattered documents still on the desk. His jaw tightens, and I can tell he's holding back whatever storm is brewing inside him.

"Mia," he says, his voice low but edged with tension. "We need to talk."

I meet his gaze, my heart pounding. "About what?" I ask, trying to keep my tone steady.

“About this,” he says, gesturing to the papers. “I told you to leave it alone.”

“And I told you I deserve to know the truth,” I snap, standing to face him. “These are my parents, Carlito. This is my inheritance. You can’t keep shutting me out.”

His expression hardens. “I’m trying to protect you,” he says, his voice rising slightly. “This isn’t a game, Mia. The more you dig, the more dangerous this gets.”

“Dangerous for who?” I demand. “For me, or for you? What aren’t you telling me, Carlito?”

The silence between us is suffocating. He looks at me like he’s weighing whether or not to say something, but the wall goes up again, and I see the decision in his eyes.

“I can’t tell you,” he says finally, the words clipped and cold.

The frustration boils over, and I shove the papers toward him. “You think you’re protecting me by keeping me in the dark? You’re not. You’re just making me doubt everything—doubt you.”

His hand slams down on the desk, making me jump. “Don’t you get it, Mia?” he growls. “I would burn the entire world to the ground to keep you safe. But I can’t protect you if you don’t trust me.”

“And I can’t trust you if you keep lying to me!” I shout back, the words spilling out before I can stop them.

The air crackles with tension as we stare each other down, neither willing to back down. My breathing is shallow, my chest tight. The nausea I’ve been ignoring all day suddenly hits me like a tidal wave.

My knees buckle, and I reach for the desk to steady myself, but my vision blurs. “Carlito—” I manage to whisper before the world tilts sideways.

“Mia!” His voice is panicked as he catches me, his strong arms wrapping around me before I hit the ground.

The last thing I hear is the pounding of my heart and Carlito’s voice, low and desperate, calling my name before everything fades to black.

### Chapter 20

#### Carlito

The sound of muffled voices filters through the closed door of the guest room. I stand outside, leaning against the wall, trying to steady my breathing. The doctor's words echo in my head, clear and inescapable: "She's pregnant."

I'm not sure what hits me harder—the shock of the news or the flood of emotions that follows. Relief. Fear. A fierce, primal protectiveness that courses through my veins.

I glance toward the door again, my hand hovering over the handle. Mia's in there, resting after fainting last night. I haven't seen her since the doctor arrived, but I can imagine the look on her face when she finds out. Will she be terrified? Angry? Happy?

I push the thought aside and step into the room. The air inside is thick with quiet tension, the faint scent of antiseptic lingering from the doctor's visit. Mia stirs on the bed, her lashes fluttering as she slowly comes to.

Her hazel eyes meet mine, dazed and unsure at first, but then a flash of recognition flickers in them.

"Carlito," she murmurs, her voice hoarse. "What... what happened?"

I pull the chair closer to the bed, my movements slow and deliberate, as if any sudden action might shatter the moment. "You fainted," I say, my tone soft. "The doctor

came to check on you.”

She sits up slightly, wincing as she props herself on her elbows. “The doctor?” she repeats, her brows knitting together. “Why?”

I hesitate, the words caught in my throat. How do you tell someone that everything they know about their life is about to change?

“Mia,” I begin, my voice steady but low. “You’re... pregnant.”

Her breath hitches, and she stares at me, unblinking. “What?”

“The doctor confirmed it this morning,” I say, leaning forward. “You’re going to have a baby.”

For a moment, she says nothing. Her hands move to her stomach, her fingers trembling slightly as they press against the soft fabric of her shirt.

“A baby,” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

I reach out, taking her hand in mine. “Mia,” I say gently, “this changes everything. You and our child... you’re my world now. And I will do whatever it takes to keep you both safe.”

Her gaze lifts to mine, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Carlito... I don’t even know how to process this,” she says, her voice breaking. “Everything feels so... overwhelming.”

I squeeze her hand, my thumb brushing against her knuckles. “I know it’s a lot,” I admit, my voice softening. “But I need you to trust me. Whatever happens, I’ll make sure you’re both protected.”

Her lips part as if she's about to respond, but the words don't come. Instead, she shifts her gaze to the window, her profile illuminated by the soft morning light.

The room falls into a heavy silence, broken only by the sound of our breathing. As I watch her process the news, a single thought burns in my mind: This is my chance to make things right.

Mia shifts under the covers, her eyes darting toward the documents still scattered on the desk. Her silence is deafening, and for a moment, I wonder if she regrets telling me how overwhelmed she feels.

"Say something," I urge, leaning closer.

She blinks, as though pulling herself out of a trance. "It's just... a lot to take in," she says softly, her voice wavering. "A baby? I didn't even think..."

Her words trail off, and she bites her lip, her gaze dropping to her hands resting on her stomach.

"I know," I say, my tone softening. "It's a lot, but we'll figure this out together."

Her eyes snap up to mine, and there's a flicker of doubt in them. "Will we, Carlito? Because right now, it feels like I don't know you at all. And now... now there's a baby in the middle of all of this."

Her words hit hard, but I can't blame her. She's right—I've built walls between us, keeping her in the dark about things that directly affect her life. Still, the idea of telling her everything about my world, about who I really am...

"It's not that simple," I say, my voice firm but calm.

Mia laughs bitterly. “Nothing with you ever is.”

I feel the tension coil in my chest, but I force myself to stay grounded. “You’re right,” I admit. “But keeping you in the dark—it was never about controlling you, Mia. It was about keeping you safe.”

Her gaze sharpens, and for a moment, she looks like she’s going to argue. But then her expression softens, and her shoulders sag. “I don’t even know what to feel,” she admits. “One moment, I’m finding out my parents were hiding this entire other life, and the next, I’m... I’m pregnant. It’s too much.”

I move closer, my hand brushing hers. “I know it’s overwhelming, but you don’t have to do this alone. I’ll be here for you every step of the way.”

The vulnerability in my voice surprises even me. I’ve spent my entire life keeping my emotions locked away, refusing to let anyone see the cracks in my armor. But with Mia, everything is different.

“I just need time,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You’ll have it,” I promise, brushing a strand of hair away from her face.

The tension between us shifts, softening into something else entirely. I can feel it in the way her breathing changes, in the way her hand hesitantly brushes against mine.

I lean forward, my lips capturing hers in a kiss that is both tender and fierce. Mia responds, her hands threading through my hair, pulling me closer. Our tongues dance, a silent promise of love and protection.

As the kiss deepens, my hands roam her body, tracing the curves I’ve come to adore. I unbutton her garment, and I can’t help but marvel at the beauty of her pregnant form.

Her breasts are fuller, her nipples darkening with arousal.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper against her neck, my breath hot on her skin. "I want to worship every inch of you."

Mia's breath quickens, and she arches into me, her hands tugging at my shirt, eager to feel my skin against hers. I oblige, shedding my clothes until I stand before her, my body hard and ready.

"Please, Carlito," she pleads, her voice husky with desire. "I need you."

I don't need further encouragement. I lower myself onto the bed, my eyes never leaving hers. I kiss her again, my hands exploring her body, mapping every inch of her soft skin. I caress her breasts, pinching her nipples until they peak, and she moans, her back arching off the bed.

"Yes, amore," I growl, my hands sliding down her body, tracing the curve of her belly. "Let me pleasure you."

Mia's eyes flutter shut as I kiss my way down her body, my tongue leaving a trail of fire on her sensitive skin. I reach her navel, dipping my tongue into the hollow, and she squirms, her hands fisting in the sheets.

"Carlito, please," she begs, her voice breathless.

I smile against her skin, my hands gripping her thighs, spreading them open. I blow gently on her core, making her shiver, and then I lower my head, my tongue flicking her clit.

"Oh God," she cries out, her hips bucking against my mouth. "Yes, right there."



I oblige, my tongue working her sweet spot, my fingers sliding into her wet heat. I thrust my fingers in and out, curling them to hit her G-spot, and Mia's moans fill the room. Her body trembles, her orgasm building, and I redouble my efforts, determined to bring her to the brink.

"Come for me, Mia," I urge, my voice hoarse with desire. "Let go."

Mia's back arches off the bed, her hands gripping my hair, holding me to her as her body shakes with release. I continue to lap at her, drawing out her pleasure, until she is boneless beneath me, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

I kiss my way back up her body, my hands caressing her softly. "You're incredible," I whisper, my eyes dark with desire.

Mia smiles, her eyes heavy-lidded, her body still humming with pleasure. "You make me feel incredible," she purrs, her hands sliding down my chest, wrapping around my throbbing cock.

I groan, my body aching for release. "I need to be inside you, Mia. Now."

She giggles, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Impatient, are we?"

I don't respond, instead capturing her lips in a hungry kiss. Mia wraps her legs around my waist, guiding me to her entrance, and I thrust forward, filling her in one smooth motion.

"Oh, fuck," I growl, my eyes rolling back in my head as her tight heat envelops me.

Mia's nails dig into my shoulders, her body adjusting to my size. "You feel so good," she moans, her hips rising to meet my thrusts.

I set a relentless pace, my body demanding release, but I want Mia to come with me. I reach between us, my fingers finding her clit, and I rub in firm circles as I drive into her.

"That's it, Mia," I grunt, my breath coming in pants. "Come for me again."

Mia's body tightens around me, her inner muscles clenching, and she cries out, her orgasm rippling through her. I follow her over the edge, my cock pulsing as I empty myself into her, our bodies moving in perfect sync.

We lie there, our hearts pounding, our bodies slick with sweat. I roll onto my back, pulling Mia with me, her head resting on my chest. I feel her breath, steady and rhythmic, as she processes the intensity of what has just transpired between us.

"You're amazing," she whispers, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest.

I smile, my eyes closed, savoring the afterglow. "So are you, Mia. So are you."

Afterward, the room feels quieter, heavier. Mia lies beside me, her breathing steady as she stares at the ceiling. My arm drapes over her, but her body feels tense, like her mind is still racing.

"You're scared," I say, breaking the silence.

She turns to me, her eyes glassy. "Aren't you?"

I don't answer right away. Instead, I tighten my hold on her. "Only of failing you," I admit. "But I won't. I'll protect you and this baby with everything I have."

Her lips curve into a faint, sad smile. "I want to believe that."

I press a kiss to her temple, my own fears swirling beneath the surface.

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As the morning light filters through the curtains, a buzz from my phone pulls me back to reality. I glance at the screen, my jaw tightening at Leo's message: Dominic has made contact with Mia. We need to act fast.

I finish reading the message and a storm begins brewing inside me, a mix of anger and urgency. Dominic isn't just a threat to my world—he's a direct danger to Mia and our unborn child.

As I watch her, the mother of my unborn child, I vow to do whatever it takes. She's mine to protect, no matter the cost.

### Chapter 21

Mia

The study is quiet except for the rhythmic ticking of a clock on the far wall. My gaze rests on the heavy wooden desk where I found the documents last night. The inheritance, Matteo Russo, the letters—they all weigh on me like an anchor, dragging me deeper into a reality I don't fully understand.

I sit on the leather armchair, hands trembling against the soft fabric of my dress. After everything—my fainting spell, the pregnancy news, Carlito's careful tenderness this morning—my mind hasn't stopped spinning. But there's one thing I know: I can't avoid this confrontation any longer.

When Carlito finally steps into the room, the door clicking shut behind him, the tension feels palpable. He's dressed sharply, as always, but there's an air of weariness about him that I can't ignore. His gaze meets mine, dark and guarded.

"Mia," he says, his voice low and steady, "you should be resting."

"Don't," I say, cutting him off. My voice is sharper than I intended, but I don't back down. "Don't tell me to rest. I need answers, Carlito. No more deflecting."

His jaw tightens as he approaches, stopping a few steps away. "What do you want to know?"

I rise from the chair, closing the distance between us. "Everything," I demand.

“About the inheritance. About Matteo Russo. About the person who’s sending me messages, warning me about you. I’m done being in the dark.”

For a moment, Carlito doesn’t respond. His silence stretches between us, thick and suffocating. When he finally speaks, his voice is softer, almost reluctant. “You’re not ready for the truth, Mia.”

“Don’t patronize me,” I snap, my frustration bubbling to the surface. “Do you think I can’t handle it? That I’m some fragile doll you need to protect? I’m carrying your child, Carlito. I deserve to know what kind of world I’ve been dragged into.”

His eyes flicker with something—pain, perhaps—but it’s gone as quickly as it appeared. He exhales slowly, running a hand through his hair. “You’re right,” he says finally. “You deserve the truth.”

I hold my breath as he steps closer, his towering presence both intimidating and reassuring.

“I’m not just the man you married,” he begins, his voice heavy with gravity. “I’m the head of the Marcelli family. A Mafia Don. One of the most powerful in Las Vegas.”

The words hang in the air, each syllable sinking into me like stones.

For a moment, I can’t move, can’t speak. “A... Mafia Don?” I whisper, the disbelief thick in my voice.

“Yes,” he says, his gaze steady on mine. “Everything I’ve done—every decision I’ve made—it’s been to protect you and Bianca. To keep you out of this world as much as possible.”

My knees feel weak, but I force myself to stay upright. The weight of his confession

settles over me, suffocating and surreal.

Before I can process Carlito's words, the sound of Bianca's voice cuts through the air like a blade: "You're what?"

Both Carlito and I turn toward the door to see Bianca standing there, her eyes wide with shock and disbelief. Her hands tremble as she clutches the edge of the doorway, her knuckles white against the dark wood.

"Bianca," Carlito says, his voice calm but firm.

She steps into the room, shaking her head as if trying to process what she just heard. "You're joking, right? A Mafia Don? This is some sick joke."

Carlito straightens, his expression unreadable. "It's not a joke," he says evenly.

Bianca lets out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. "So, all this time, you've been lying to us? To me? You've let us live in this bubble, thinking you're just a businessman, while you're out there... what? Running some criminal empire?"

"It was never about lying to you," Carlito says, his tone steady but laced with an edge of frustration. "It was about keeping you safe."

"Safe?" Bianca snaps, her voice rising. "Dario is dead, and you're telling me this was all to keep us safe? How do you even say that with a straight face?"

Her words hit like a whip, and for a moment, the room falls silent. I glance at Carlito, whose jaw tightens, his fists clenching at his sides.

"I did everything I could to protect Dario," he says quietly, his voice thick with restrained emotion. "But this isn't about him. It's about us. About making sure no one

else gets hurt.”

Bianca’s laugh is bitter, filled with pain. “Us? There is no ‘us,’ Dad. You’ve been playing God with our lives, making decisions without telling us the truth. How do you expect me to trust anything you say now?”

“Bianca,” I say softly, stepping toward her.

She whirls on me, her green eyes blazing. “And you—how can you just stand there? He’s been lying to you too! He dragged you into this mess, Mia.”

Her words cut deep, but I force myself to stay calm. “I’m trying to understand,” I say, my voice steady but firm. “I don’t like being lied to, but I know Carlito wouldn’t have done this if he didn’t think it was necessary.”

Bianca scoffs, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. “Necessary? You sound just like him. Always justifying everything. But guess what? None of this feels justified to me.”

Carlito takes a step forward, his gaze fixed on Bianca. “I’ve made mistakes,” he admits, his voice low but resolute. “But every choice I’ve made has been to protect you and Mia. You might not understand it now, but I did what I had to do.”

Bianca shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes. “You keep saying that, but all I see is chaos and danger. Dario is dead, and now I find out you’re part of the reason why. How am I supposed to be okay with that?”

Carlito’s expression darkens, but he doesn’t respond. Instead, he steps back, giving her space to process her emotions.

Bianca’s gaze shifts between us, her anger giving way to something softer—hurt,

betrayal, fear. “I need air,” she says quietly before turning and leaving the room, the echo of her footsteps fading down the hall.

The silence she leaves behind is deafening. My eyes linger on the doorway, my heart heavy with the weight of everything that just unfolded.

Carlito lets out a slow breath, his shoulders sagging slightly as he turns to me. “This is why I didn’t want you to know,” he says quietly. “Why I didn’t want any of this to touch you.”

I fold my arms, my gaze hardening. “You can’t keep using that excuse, Carlito. I’m not some fragile thing you can shield forever. You don’t get to decide what I can or can’t handle.”

His dark eyes meet mine, filled with a mix of regret and something deeper—something raw. “You’re right,” he admits, his voice barely above a whisper. “But it doesn’t change the fact that this world is dangerous. The less you know, the safer you are.”

“Do you really believe that?” I ask, stepping closer. “Because from where I’m standing, keeping me in the dark has only made things worse. I’m walking blind through a minefield, Carlito. I need to know what I’m up against.”

He hesitates, the conflict in his expression evident. “Mia,” he begins, but I cut him off.

“No more half-truths,” I say firmly. “You owe me the full story. About Matteo Russo. About my parents. About this inheritance. Everything. And those messages—who sent them?”

Carlito’s expression hardens, but there’s a flicker of something in his eyes—pain,



maybe. “The messages,” he repeats, his voice low. “They’re from the same man who killed Dario.”

I flinch, the weight of his words sinking like a stone in my chest. “What?”

“His name is Dominic,” Carlito continues, his voice tense but deliberate. “He’s working for Matteo, trying to manipulate you into giving them exactly what they want.”

Dominic. The name feels foreign on my tongue, sharp and unfamiliar. But it’s what Carlito says next that sends a chill down my spine.

“Matteo isn’t just some rival businessman,” he says, his tone darkening. “He’s the head of a Mafia faction that has been at war with my family for decades. He’s my greatest threat—and now, he’s yours.”

I stiffen at his words, my chest tightening. “And Dominic?”

“Matteo took Dominic under his wing,” Carlito explains. “Not out of kindness, but to use him. Matteo saw your father as his greatest rival, and when Dominic came of age, he molded him into a weapon—a way to hurt your family from the inside.”

The room spins as I process his words. My brother. A weapon. The man who killed Dario.

“And my mother?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“She loved your father, but she struggled with the Mafia life they built together,” Carlito explains. “She tried to shield you from it, to keep you as far from their world as possible. That’s why they kept Dominic a secret—because he was already entrenched in it by the time you were born. They didn’t want you to follow the same

path.”

I clutch the edge of the desk for support, my mind racing. The pieces are starting to come together, but they don’t form a picture I can understand.

“And my inheritance,” I murmur. “That’s tied to all of this, isn’t it?”

Carlito nods. “Your inheritance is tied to a key piece of property your father used to cement his power—land that Matteo has been trying to claim for decades. When your father died, it passed to you, but Matteo’s never stopped scheming to take it for himself.”

He pauses, his gaze softening. “Your father wanted to protect you, Mia. But in trying to shield you, he left you with a target on your back. That property isn’t just land—it’s a symbol of power, of legitimacy. If Matteo gets it, he’ll use it to tip the scales in his favor, and he won’t care what happens to you in the process.”

I feel the ground shifting beneath me, the weight of my father’s decisions and their consequences pressing down on my shoulders. “He wanted to protect me,” I murmur, more to myself than Carlito.

“Yes,” Carlito says softly. “But in doing so, he created something Matteo sees as leverage. That’s why Dominic is here—to finish what Matteo started years ago.”

The room feels smaller, the air heavier. I don’t know whether to feel angry, betrayed, or grateful. Maybe all three.

As the weight of his confession settles over me, a single thought burns in my mind: If Carlito is the man I’ve married, what else has he kept from me?

Carlito’s phone buzzes on the desk, the screen lighting up with a message from Leo:

Dominic has been spotted near the property. He's making his move.

### Chapter 22

#### Carlito

The echoes of Mia's words from earlier still sting as I sit alone in the study. Her demand for honesty was like a crack in the foundation I've spent years fortifying. After revealing my Mafia ties, I could see the doubt in her eyes—doubt not just about me but about the life I've thrust her into. Now, as the sun dips below the horizon, I force myself to shift focus. Matteo's shadow is growing darker, and I can't let my personal fears blind me to the war at hand.

The study is cloaked in shadows, the faint glow from the desk lamp illuminating the chaos strewn across the polished wood. Reports, photos, maps—all pieces of a puzzle that seems to shift the moment I think I have it figured out.

Leo stands across from me, arms crossed, his expression grim. "Dominic's been spotted near the inheritance property again," he says, his voice low. "It's not just reconnaissance anymore. Matteo's pushing him closer to action."

I nod, leaning forward to examine the surveillance images. Dominic's face is a stark reminder of the tangled web we're caught in. His posture is casual, but his presence isn't accidental. Matteo is playing his hand, testing my patience and defenses.

"What about the security detail?" I ask, my tone clipped.

"They're holding for now," Leo replies, placing a map alongside the dossier. "But it's only a matter of time before Dominic makes his move—or Matteo orders him to."

My hand tightens around the armrest of the chair. Dominic, the man who killed Dario, is circling closer to Mia's inheritance, and by extension, to her. It's a game Matteo is all too good at—exploiting vulnerabilities to claim victory.

“Double the guards,” I say firmly. “Every entry point, every vulnerable angle—I want them covered. And keep eyes on Dominic at all times. The second he steps out of line, I want to know.”

Leo hesitates for a moment before speaking again. “What about Mia? Are you going to tell her what's going on?”

The question cuts through the tension like a blade. My instinct is to protect her, to shield her from the darkness closing in. But after the previous events of today—after the questions in her eyes, the way she clung to hope despite her doubts—I'm no longer sure if keeping her in the dark is the right choice.

“She doesn't need to know yet,” I say finally, my voice firm but lacking conviction. “Not until I have a handle on this.”

Leo doesn't argue, but his silence says enough. He leaves the study, his footsteps fading down the hall.

Alone again, I lean back in my chair, the weight of everything pressing against me. For all my power and control, this war is slipping through my fingers, threatening to unravel everything I've built.

The inheritance property is more than a piece of land—it's a key to Matteo's game, a symbol of leverage he plans to use against me. And Dominic is the one holding the match, ready to set everything ablaze.

The thought of Mia caught in the crossfire tightens my chest. She's my reason for all

of this, yet the walls I've built to protect her are starting to feel like barriers keeping her away.

A faint noise in the hall pulls me from my thoughts. Bianca steps into the doorway, her coat draped over her arm and a small suitcase at her feet.

"You're leaving," I say, my voice sharper than I intend.

She nods, stepping further into the room. "I have to," she says softly. "This isn't my world, Dad. It never was."

Her words hang in the air, heavy and final. I rise from my chair, closing the space between us. "Bianca, running away doesn't solve anything," I say, keeping my voice calm, though my frustration simmers beneath the surface.

She meets my gaze, her expression resolute. "This isn't running away. This is surviving. You've built this empire, Dad, and it's suffocating. Dario is dead because of it. And I... I can't be next. I won't."

The mention of Dario twists a knife already embedded in my chest. His loss is a wound that hasn't begun to heal, and Bianca's grief only magnifies it.

"I'm doing everything I can to keep you safe," I say, my tone firm but low. "That's why I've doubled security, why I've been fighting to keep the danger away from the people I love. Do you think this is easy for me?"

Her green eyes, so much like her late mother's, soften for a fleeting moment before hardening again. "I think you mean well, but you don't see the damage you leave in your wake. You've always believed you could control everything, but this..." she gestures around the study, the weight of her accusation clear. "This isn't control. This is chaos."

The silence between us is deafening. I take a step closer, my hands curling into fists at my sides. “I’m not letting Matteo win. And I’m not letting Dominic take away anyone else I care about. You’re my daughter, Bianca. You matter more to me than anything else in this world.”

She shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes. “Then let me go. Let me leave before I resent you for what you’ve done to all of us.”

The finality in her voice makes it clear that this isn’t a request—it’s a decision she’s already made. I reach out, pulling her into a tight embrace. She doesn’t resist, but the tension in her body is unmistakable.

“Where will you go?” I ask quietly.

“Somewhere quiet,” she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. “Somewhere that doesn’t have your name attached to it.”

I close my eyes briefly, the ache in my chest spreading like wildfire. “I can’t protect you if you leave,” I say, my voice barely audible.

She pulls back, her tear-streaked face filled with a painful mixture of love and determination. “Maybe I need to learn to protect myself.”

Her suitcase wheels squeak against the marble as she turns to leave. The sound of the front door closing behind her echoes through the penthouse, leaving an emptiness that feels too vast to fill.

Leo enters the study a moment later, his eyes scanning the room as if sensing the tension. “Dominic’s activity near the property is ramping up,” he says, breaking the silence.

“Tell the men to prepare,” I say, my voice cold now, all traces of vulnerability locked away. “If Dominic makes a move, I want him stopped before he gets anywhere close.”

Leo nods and leaves, his departure leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I turn to the window, the city lights sprawling below. The view is as breathtaking as ever, but tonight, it feels like a battlefield I’m losing control of.

The stillness of the penthouse is unsettling, a stark contrast to the storm brewing inside me. Every decision I’ve made feels like a double-edged sword, cutting as much as it protects.

Bianca’s departure weighs heavily on me, her final words echoing in my mind. She’s not wrong about the chaos my world brings, but letting her go feels like a failure. For all my power, I couldn’t give my daughter the one thing she craved most—peace.

I turn back to the desk, my eyes scanning the dossier Leo left behind. Dominic’s presence near the inheritance property isn’t just a move; it’s a message. Matteo knows the value of that land—what it represents—and he’s leveraging Dominic to strike where it hurts most.

A sharp knock on the study door snaps me from my thoughts. Leo steps in, his expression as grim as ever. “We’ve confirmed Dominic’s team has scouted the property multiple times today. He’s not being subtle about it.”

“Good,” I say, my tone cold and calculated. “If he’s being bold, he’s making mistakes. I want every patrol reinforced. No gaps, no blind spots. If Dominic steps onto that land, I want him taken down before he knows what hit him.”

Leo nods but hesitates, something unspoken lingering in his posture. “Carlito,” he



begins carefully, “this isn’t just about the property, is it? Matteo’s pushing harder because he knows Mia’s tied to it. This isn’t a typical play for territory. He’s aiming for her.”

His words ignite a fury I’ve been holding back all day. “Then Matteo just signed his death warrant,” I growl, slamming the dossier shut.

But even as the words leave my mouth, a sliver of doubt creeps in. Matteo isn’t just any rival—he’s my equal in ruthlessness and strategy. If he’s targeting Mia, he’s prepared for whatever retaliation I bring.

The thought tightens my chest. Mia’s safety is my priority, but the truth is, I’ve brought her into a war she didn’t choose. And now, with Dominic circling closer, the stakes have never been higher.

“I’ll handle it,” I say, more to myself than to Leo.

He nods and leaves the room, the door clicking shut behind him.

For a moment, the silence hangs heavy between us, pressing down like a weight I can’t lift. Then I hear soft footsteps, and Mia steps into the study. She pauses in the doorway, her hazel eyes searching mine.

“We need to talk,” she says, her voice steady but carrying an edge that wasn’t there before.

I nod, gesturing toward the chair across from me. “I’ll tell you what I can,” I say, though I already know she won’t be satisfied with that.

She doesn’t sit. Instead, she stands firm, her gaze narrowing. “Where’s Bianca?” she asks abruptly.

The question takes me off guard. For a moment, I hesitate, unsure how to soften the blow. “She’s gone,” I say finally. “She left earlier this evening.”

Her brows knit together, a flicker of disbelief crossing her face. “She left?”

“She needed space,” I explain, keeping my tone calm. “After everything with Dario, she couldn’t stay here any longer.”

Mia shakes her head, stepping back as if the words physically hit her. “You just let her go?”

“She made her choice,” I reply evenly. “I couldn’t stop her, Mia. And I won’t try to control you, either.”

Her lips part as if to argue, but she closes them again, pressing her fingers to her temple instead. Without another word, she turns and walks away.

A few moments later, I hear the soft click of the sliding balcony door. Mia must be trying to get some fresh air.

I decide not to follow her and instead make my way deeper into the penthouse.

The news about Bianca isn’t anything I can fix with words.

### Chapter 23

Mia

The cool evening air brushes against my skin as I step onto the balcony, seeking some semblance of peace after confronting Carlito. The glow of the Las Vegas skyline stretches out before me, but its beauty feels hollow, a sharp contrast to the storm inside me.

Bianca's departure cuts deeper than I expected. She's always been strong, a fiery force who could face anything head-on. But now she's gone, driven away by grief and the weight of this world. My chest tightens at the thought. She didn't even say goodbye to me.

I lean against the railing, gripping the cold metal as if it can anchor me. Was she right to leave? Could I ever walk away from Carlito and this tangled life?

A faint sound—like the scuff of a shoe—breaks through my thoughts. I stiffen, my grip tightening. Turning my head slowly, I search the shadows, my pulse quickening.

“Lost in thought?”

The voice is low and smooth, sending a jolt of alarm through me. My breath catches as I whirl around, my eyes darting to the edge of the balcony.

A man steps forward, his features partially obscured by the dim light. He's tall and lean, his stance casual but deliberate. Something about him feels familiar, a nagging

sense of recognition I can't place.

"Who are you?" I demand, my voice sharper than I intend.

He raises his hands slightly, a mockery of surrender. "Relax. I'm not here to hurt you."

My heart pounds, but I hold my ground. "You didn't answer my question."

He chuckles softly, the sound devoid of humor. "You don't recognize me, do you?" He tilts his head, stepping into the light just enough for me to catch the sharp angles of his face.

The familiarity clicks like a puzzle piece snapping into place. My mind flashes back to the rooftop at the gala—the man who stared at me, the one Carlito's guards were looking for.

"Dominic," I breathe, taking a step back.

His smirk deepens, though there's no warmth in it. "That's more like it."

"What are you doing here?" I demand, my voice steady despite the rising panic in my chest.

He leans casually against the railing, as if we're old friends having a chat. "I slipped in when the gates opened. Someone was leaving. A woman in a hurry—looked angry. Your sister, maybe?"

Bianca. The thought of him watching her—even briefly—makes my stomach churn.

"Why are you here?" I press, my tone sharper now.

His smirk fades, replaced by something colder. “To tell you the truth. Or at least as much as you can handle.”

My hands clench into fists at my sides. “And why should I trust you?”

His dark eyes meet mine, unflinching. “Because I’m the only one willing to tell you what Carlito won’t. Starting with your inheritance.”

I don’t flinch, but my chest tightens. “What could you possibly tell me that I don’t already know?”

Dominic’s smirk falters, replaced by a colder, more calculating expression. “You think you know everything, little sister? That Carlito’s been honest with you about what you’re tangled in?”

His words hit a nerve, and I can’t hide my frustration. “Carlito told me the truth—about my inheritance, about Matteo’s interest in it. And he told me about you.”

Something flickers in Dominic’s gaze—surprise? Amusement?—before he takes a slow step closer. “Did he tell you why Matteo really wants the property? Or did he just feed you enough to keep you complacent?”

I hesitate, my mind racing. Carlito said the property was leverage, a piece of my father’s legacy Matteo wanted to exploit. But the way Dominic phrases it feels... heavier.

“You’re stalling,” I say, folding my arms. “If you know something I don’t, just say it.”

Dominic exhales, his jaw tightening. “It’s not just about the property, Mia. It’s what’s

in it. Matteo believes your father left something hidden—something powerful enough to tip the balance of power in this war. And he's willing to tear apart anyone standing in his way to get it."

Something hidden? The phrase echoes in my mind. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know exactly what it is," Dominic admits, his tone sharp with frustration. "But whatever it is, it's more than some sentimental inheritance. And it's the key to bringing down Matteo's empire."

The weight of his words presses against me, suffocating and surreal. My voice is quiet when I ask, "And what about you, Dominic? What do you want from me?"

His face hardens. "I want you to survive. Whatever this thing is, Matteo won't stop until he gets it. He'll destroy Carlito. And if you don't tread carefully, he'll destroy you too."

"Why do you even care?" The question slips out before I can stop it, the rawness in my voice betraying my turmoil.

Dominic's dark eyes flicker, and for a moment, I see something softer beneath his hardened exterior. "Because you're my sister," he says, the words quiet but firm. "And no matter how messed up this world is, you deserve to know the truth."

The sincerity in his tone shakes me, but I can't let myself trust it completely. "You killed Dario," I whisper, my voice trembling. "You chose Matteo."

Dominic's jaw tightens, regret flashing across his face. "I didn't have a choice," he says, his voice low and hoarse. "Matteo holds the strings, Mia. And unless we find a way to cut them, he'll keep pulling until there's nothing left of any of us."

His words hang in the cool night air, each one a sharp blade carving into the fragile world I thought I knew. I study his face, searching for anything—lies, remorse, truth. But all I see is a man trapped by his own choices, caught between regret and survival.

“You expect me to believe you?” My voice wavers, but my stare doesn’t falter. “After everything you’ve done, you think I’d take your word over Carlito’s?”

“I don’t expect anything from you, Mia,” Dominic counters, his tone flat yet heavy with meaning. “I don’t need you to trust me. I need you to listen. ”

I shake my head, anger rising like a tide. “Listen to what? That Carlito’s a liar? That I’m a target because of some inheritance I didn’t even know about? You don’t care about me, Dominic. You’re here because you’re scared of Matteo.”

He flinches at Matteo’s name, his jaw tightening. “You think I’m scared for myself?” He steps closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “I’m scared for you. For what Matteo will do when he gets what he wants—or worse, when he doesn’t.”

“And what does he want, exactly?” I ask, the question more bitter than genuine. “This property? The inheritance? Why am I so important all of a sudden?”

Dominic lets out a harsh, humorless laugh. “It’s not the inheritance itself, Mia. It’s what it represents. That property—it’s leverage. A piece of the power your father built, and Matteo wants every last shred of it. But you...” His gaze darkens, a mix of pity and urgency in his eyes. “You have your father’s blood. Our father’s blood. A bloodline that Matteo will stop at nothing to destroy. He wants revenge for whatever hidden item our father left in that inheritance property.”

The name Caruso feels distant now, a phantom of a life I never fully understood. But it still clings to me, tethered by Dominic’s words and the weight of the past.

“If you cared so much, why didn’t you come for me sooner?” I demand, my voice sharp. “Why wait until now, when everything’s already falling apart?”

“I didn’t know about you,” Dominic admits, his voice softening. “Not until Matteo did. By then, it was too late—I was already part of his plans. But I’m here now, Mia, because I need you to survive this.”

His words strike a chord I don’t want to acknowledge. I fold my arms tightly across my chest, as if that could shield me from the storm brewing in my mind. “And Carlito? What’s his role in all this?”

Dominic’s eyes narrow. “He’s playing his part, just like I am. But don’t think for a second he’s told you everything. Matteo isn’t the only threat you need to worry about, Mia.”

A sound from inside the penthouse breaks the tension—a soft knock, followed by approaching footsteps. Dominic’s head snaps toward the glass door, his body stiffening.

“I’ll find you again,” he says quickly, his voice low. “Until then, don’t trust anyone—not completely.”

Before I can respond, Dominic swings himself over the balcony railing and disappears into the evening air.

The sliding door opens behind me, and I turn to find Carlito standing there, his dark eyes immediately locking onto mine.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his tone clipped with suspicion.

I force a smile, but my heart pounds against my ribs. “Nothing. Just needed some



air.”

As I brush past him to step inside, his gaze lingers, heavy with doubt.

Carlito’s voice stops me before I reach the hallway. “You’re lying, Mia. What are you hiding from me?”

### Chapter 24

#### Carlito

The penthouse feels heavier this evening as the light begins to fade. The tension clinging to the air like a storm waiting to break. My eyes follow Mia as she brushes past me, her movements sharp, her energy off. Whatever she's hiding, it's written all over her.

"You're lying, Mia," I say, keeping my tone calm but edged with steel. "What are you hiding from me?"

She stops, her back to me, her hand hovering near the hallway wall. I wait for her to turn around, to face me with the truth or at least an explanation. Instead, she exhales a slow, measured breath and continues walking, her voice clipped as she throws the words over her shoulder.

"Goodnight, Carlito."

The door to our bedroom clicks shut, and the sound feels louder than it should. My jaw clenches, frustration bubbling under my skin. Mia's always been strong-willed, but this... this is different. She's shutting me out in a way she never has before.

I linger near the hallway for a moment, debating whether to follow her, to demand the answers I know she's withholding. But the weight of today's events—Bianca leaving, Matteo's growing threat, and now Mia's secrecy—presses against me like a vice. I turn away, heading back to the living room, but my eyes catch the sliding glass door

leading to the balcony.

A faint mark on the railing pulls me closer. It's subtle, barely there—a smudge that could easily be missed. But combined with Mia's behavior, it's enough to set my instincts on edge. Someone was out here.

I step onto the balcony, the late evening air cutting through the tension in my chest. My gaze sweeps over the space, scanning for anything out of place, but the city lights below blur into a haze of suspicion.

The sound of knuckles rapping against the penthouse door pulls me back inside. Leo stands in the doorway, his expression as grim as ever.

“We’ve got a problem,” he says, stepping in without waiting for an invitation.

“When don’t we?” I mutter, shutting the door behind him.

“Matteo’s men are testing our defenses,” Leo explains. “They’ve been scouting the inheritance property all day, but this evening they got bolder. They’re making moves.”

I let out a string of curses under my breath, my hand running through my hair. Matteo’s timing couldn’t be worse. With Mia on edge and Bianca gone, the cracks in my control are widening by the minute.

“I want double the guard detail,” I say, my voice firm. “No gaps, no blind spots. If Matteo’s men so much as breathe in the wrong direction, I want to know about it.”

“It’s already in motion,” Leo replies. He hesitates, his eyes narrowing slightly. “But what about Mia? Something’s off with her.”

I stiffen, my gaze hardening. “She’s hiding something.”

Leo doesn’t respond, but the look he gives me is enough. He knows as well as I do that secrets in our world are never harmless.

As he leaves, I find myself staring at the closed bedroom door again. Whatever Mia’s keeping from me, it’s only a matter of time before it surfaces. And when it does, I’ll be ready.

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The penthouse feels too quiet, the kind of silence that amplifies every stray thought. I try to focus on the reports Leo sent earlier, pages spread across the coffee table, but my mind keeps circling back to Mia.

Whatever happened on that balcony earlier on has her rattled. Her quiet detachment, the way she avoided my eyes—it’s unlike her. And that only makes it worse.

I rise from the couch, rolling my shoulders to shake off the tension coiled there. Stepping toward the glass doors leading to the balcony, I find myself drawn to the place where I know she stood earlier. The evening has faded into night and the city lights stretch endlessly, mocking the illusion of control I’ve spent years building.

As I stare into the night, the sound of soft footsteps reaches me. I turn to see Mia emerging from the hallway, her silhouette framed by the dim light spilling from the kitchen. She’s changed into a loose-fitting robe, her hair tumbling over her shoulders, but her expression is guarded.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I ask, my voice breaking the stillness.

Her steps falter slightly before she joins me by the balcony doors. “No,” she admits

quietly. “I guess I have too much on my mind.”

The understatement stings. “You’re not the only one,” I reply, crossing my arms as I lean back against the glass.

Her lips tighten, and for a moment, neither of us speaks. The tension between us stretches taut, like a wire ready to snap.

Finally, she exhales, her shoulders slumping slightly. “I don’t want to fight with you, Carlito.”

“Then don’t,” I say, my tone firmer than I intend. “But if you’re keeping something from me, Mia, you need to tell me now. This isn’t just about you anymore.”

Her head snaps toward me, her hazel eyes narrowing. “You keep saying that, like I don’t understand the stakes. But have you ever thought that maybe you’re the one keeping too much from me?”

The defiance in her voice sparks something in me—frustration, sure, but also a grudging admiration for her fire.

“I’ve told you what I can,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “But if you think I’m doing this to hurt you, you’re wrong. I’m trying to keep you alive, Mia. You and our child.”

Her expression flickers at the mention of the baby, but she doesn’t back down. “And how am I supposed to trust you when you won’t trust me?”

Her question hangs between us, and for a moment, I don’t know how to answer. Because she’s right.

I reach for her then, my hand brushing her arm as I step closer. “Mia,” I say softly, “I know you’re scared. I am too. But we can’t afford to be divided—not now.”

She doesn’t pull away, but she doesn’t relax either. The space between us feels charged, like we’re balancing on a knife’s edge. And in this moment, I know that whatever happens next will either bring us closer or push us further apart.

Mia’s silence gnaws at me as I search her face, hoping for some sign that she’s willing to let me in. Instead, her lips part, and the words that come out feel like another wedge between us.

“I need time, Carlito,” she says, her voice quieter now. “Time to think, time to understand everything that’s happening.”

Time. It’s the one thing I can’t afford to give her, not with Matteo circling closer and Dominic lurking like a shadow in the periphery. But I force myself to nod, swallowing my frustration.

“I understand,” I reply, though the words taste bitter. “But, Mia, time won’t stop what’s coming. You have to trust me, even if you don’t have all the answers yet.”

Her eyes flicker with something unreadable—fear, doubt, or maybe just exhaustion. “I’m trying,” she murmurs, her hands tightening around the sash of her robe.

I take a step back, giving her space even though every instinct screams to keep her close. “Get some rest,” I say, my tone softening. “I’ll deal with Matteo and everything else. You just focus on keeping yourself and the baby safe.”

She hesitates, then nods, turning toward the hallway that leads to the bedroom. But as she walks away, a pang of unease settles in my chest.

The phone on the coffee table buzzes, breaking the heavy silence. I grab it, Leo's name flashing on the screen.

"Tell me you have good news," I say, keeping my voice low to avoid drawing Mia's attention.

"Depends on your definition," Leo replies, his tone grim. "One of our scouts spotted Dominic near the property earlier today."

I clench the phone tighter, the name sparking equal parts fury and dread. "What the hell is he doing there?"

"Can't say for sure, but if he's not aligned with Matteo, he's at least keeping close tabs on his movements."

The line crackles with static, but I don't miss the implication. Dominic might be playing both sides, but that doesn't make him any less dangerous.

"Keep an eye on him," I say, my voice steely. "And if he gets too close, neutralize him."

Leo hesitates, then responds, "Understood."

I hang up, my thoughts racing. Whatever game Dominic is playing, it's clear he's using Mia as a pawn. And I won't let anyone, not even her brother, endanger her or our child.

As I pocket the phone, I glance toward the closed bedroom door. The weight of the night presses heavily on my shoulders, but one thing remains clear: whatever Mia's keeping from me, it won't stay hidden much longer.

And when the truth comes out, it will change everything.



### Chapter 25

Mia

The morning sunlight filters into the penthouse, but its warmth feels hollow against the tension brewing in the air. Carlito stands by the window, his silhouette framed against the cityscape. I sit across the room, the stack of documents from my inheritance sprawled on the table in front of me, untouched since last night.

“I should have told you sooner,” Carlito says, breaking the silence. His voice is low, almost reluctant.

I glance up at him, unsure if he’s talking to me or himself. “Told me what?”

He turns, his dark eyes meeting mine with an intensity that pins me in place. “About Matteo’s plans. About why your inheritance matters to him.”

My breath catches, and I lean forward instinctively. This isn’t like him—Carlito doesn’t share his thoughts so freely, especially when it comes to Matteo.

“I’ve been keeping things from you, Mia,” he admits, his tone tinged with regret. “Not because I don’t trust you, but because I didn’t want you to carry this weight.”

“But now you’re telling me?” I press, my voice trembling with a mix of anger and hope.

His jaw tightens. “Because I can’t keep you safe if you don’t know what’s at stake.”

Carlito steps closer, his hands resting on the back of the chair across from me. “Matteo believes your inheritance property holds something hidden. Something your father left behind.”

I blink, the weight of his words sinking in. “Something hidden?”

“A ledger,” Carlito explains. “It contents contains some kind of leverage that could dismantle his entire empire if it fell into the wrong hands—or the right ones.”

I stare at him, my mind racing. My father’s property isn’t just a sentimental piece of my past; it’s a weapon. And if Carlito is right, Matteo will stop at nothing to claim it.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” I demand, my voice rising despite the lump forming in my throat.

Carlito sighs, his shoulders sagging slightly. “Because I didn’t want you to feel responsible for something you didn’t choose. I wanted to handle it myself.”

His honesty disarms me, but it doesn’t erase the frustration boiling inside. “You should have trusted me,” I say quietly. “I can’t stand being kept in the dark while you fight battles I don’t even understand.”

“I know,” he says, his gaze softening. “That’s why I’m telling you now.”

The vulnerability in his voice twists something deep inside me. Carlito isn’t just protecting me—he’s protecting our child, our future. But his reluctance to trust me fully feels like a shadow between us, one I’m not sure how to dispel.

As the silence stretches between us, I glance down at the documents, a flicker of determination sparking within me. If this ledger is what Matteo wants, then understanding it is the first step to protecting myself—and everyone I care about.

Carlito's honesty leaves a weight in the room, an unspoken invitation for me to meet him halfway. My hands tremble as I shuffle the documents, avoiding his gaze. I've been keeping something from him, something that now feels impossible to bury.

"I need to tell you something too," I say, my voice barely audible.

Carlito's brow furrows, his sharp gaze locking onto mine. "Mia, what is it?"

I swallow hard, forcing myself to meet his eyes. "Last evening... I spoke to Dominic."

His expression freezes, the warmth of his earlier vulnerability replaced by an icy edge. "What?"

I nod, gripping the edge of the table as if it can steady me. "He was here—on the balcony. He slipped onto the property when Bianca left. He wanted to warn me about Matteo and the inheritance."

Carlito moves closer, the tension in his body palpable. "You didn't think to tell me this sooner?"

"I wanted to," I insist, my voice rising. "But I didn't know how. And honestly, I wasn't sure if I could trust you to tell me the whole truth."

His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I fear I've pushed him too far. But then he exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. "What did he tell you?"

"That the property—my inheritance—it's not just land or money," I say, gesturing to the documents. "There's something hidden there. He didn't know what it was exactly, but he was certain it's critical to Matteo's plans."

Carlito's expression darkens, a storm brewing behind his eyes. "Of course, Dominic

would know just enough to be dangerous.”

“He also said...” I hesitate, my chest tightening. “He said you weren’t telling me everything. That there are things about this war I don’t understand.”

Carlito’s gaze snaps back to mine, his anger barely restrained. “And you believed him?”

“I don’t know what to believe,” I admit, my voice cracking. “But I had to hear him out, Carlito. For our sake. For our child’s.”

The mention of our child seems to pierce through his fury. He steps back, rubbing a hand over his face as if trying to regain control. “Mia, Dominic is dangerous. He works for Matteo. Anything he says is designed to manipulate you.”

“I know that,” I say firmly. “But what if he’s right? What if understanding this ledger—what’s really at stake—is the key to ending all of this?”

Carlito’s silence is deafening. His guarded expression tells me he’s weighing his response, calculating whether to share more or shut me out again.

Finally, he speaks, his voice low but resolute. “If there’s a ledger, and it’s tied to Matteo’s operations, then we can’t waste time. I’ll handle it, Mia.”

“No,” I say, standing. The strength in my voice surprises even me. “We’ll handle it. Together.”

Carlito stares at me, his eyes searching mine for something—trust, resolve, perhaps forgiveness. “This isn’t just about you anymore, Mia,” he says quietly. “If you’re in this with me, you have to follow my lead.”

The tension between us thickens, a battle of wills neither of us can afford to lose. But one thing is clear: the secrets between us are no longer sustainable.

His words hang in the air, heavy with expectation. I can feel the weight of them pressing against my resolve. He wants control, and maybe he's right to demand it—his world is one of shadows and strategy. But I can't let him shut me out.

"I'll follow your lead," I say, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside me. "But that means no more half-truths. If I'm in this, I need to know everything."

He nods, though I can see the struggle in his expression. "You have my word."

For now, it's enough.

Carlito steps closer, his gaze softening as the tension between us shifts, giving way to something unspoken. He reaches out, his hand brushing my cheek, the calloused warmth of his touch grounding me. "Mia, I know this hasn't been easy for you—for us. I'll make it right, I swear."

I swallow hard, his proximity making it difficult to focus on anything but the way his dark eyes seem to see straight through me. "We'll make it right," I whisper, my voice barely audible.

His lips curve into the faintest smile before he leans in, capturing my lips in a kiss that is both tender and searching. I melt into him, my hands instinctively gripping the front of his shirt, pulling him closer. His arms wrap around me, strong and steady, as though he's anchoring us in the midst of the chaos.

The kiss deepens, his lips moving against mine with a mix of restraint and longing. His hands slide to my waist, holding me firmly but gently, and I can feel the unspoken promises in the way he touches me. This isn't just passion—it's

reassurance, a silent vow that we're in this together.

My fingers trace the hard lines of his jaw, memorizing the strength there, before threading through his hair. He lets out a low hum of approval, his grip on me tightening for just a moment before he pulls back slightly, his forehead resting against mine.

"We'll figure this out," he murmurs, his breath warm against my lips. "But right now, I just need to know we're okay."

"We're okay," I reply softly, my voice steady even as my heart pounds in my chest. "We have to be."

I turn back to the documents, my fingers brushing over the faded ink and yellowed pages. Dominic's warnings echo in my mind, and I focus on the property map, tracing the outlined borders. Something about it feels off—almost incomplete.

"What is it?" Carlito asks, his sharp gaze catching the slight hesitation in my movements.

"This map," I murmur. "It's detailed, but... it's almost like something's missing." I hold it up, tilting it in the light. That's when I see it—a faint watermark, barely visible.

Carlito leans over my shoulder, his breath warm against my neck as he examines the page. "A watermark? What does it say?"

I tilt the paper further, catching the light just right. The faint outline of letters becomes clearer, forming a name: Villa delle Ombre.

"The House of Shadows," Carlito translates, his tone unreadable.

“Is that...” I trail off, my heart pounding.

“It’s an old name for the property,” he explains. “Your father called it that in his dealings. He believed it held secrets, but he never told me what they were.”

A chill runs through me as the pieces start to click into place. “If the ledger is there, and Matteo knows it... we’re running out of time, aren’t we?”

Carlito straightens, his expression grim. “Yes. And if Dominic is right, Matteo won’t wait much longer.”

The gravity of his words sinks in, and I grip the edge of the desk for support. My child. My family. Everything hinges on this.

“Then we have to go,” I say, my voice firm.

Carlito’s eyes narrow. “Mia, it’s under control, Leo and I have been working on it for a long time now. Trust me. Acting recklessly won’t work.”

“Waiting isn’t an option,” I argue. “If that ledger is as important as we think it is, we can’t let him get there first.”

He studies me, his expression a mix of frustration and admiration. “You’re more stubborn than I gave you credit for,” he says finally.

I raise an eyebrow. “You married me, remember?”

For the first time in hours, a faint smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. But it’s fleeting, replaced by the steely determination I’ve come to recognize. “If we do this, Mia, we do it my way. No arguments.”

“Agreed,” I say, though my heart races at the thought of what’s to come.

Carlito pulls out his phone, his voice brisk as he calls Leo. “Double the surveillance on the property. We’re moving soon, and I want every detail accounted for.”

As he issues orders, I glance back at the documents. The name Villa delle Ombre lingers in my mind, a haunting reminder of the secrets my father left behind.

Whatever we find there, I know one thing for certain: this isn’t just about the past anymore. It’s about survival.

Carlito ends the call, his expression unyielding. “I hope you ready for what’s coming, Mia. The chaos has only just started.”



### Chapter 26

#### Carlito

The atmosphere in the living room is as cold and sterile as my thoughts. Spread across the table are maps of the inheritance property and dossiers on Matteo's operations. Leo stands to my right, flipping through papers with the efficiency of a man who's been through too many of these situations.

"Matteo's men are on the move," Leo reports, tapping a marked area on the map. "They've been circling the perimeter for days, but this... this is different. They're testing our defenses."

I nod, my jaw tightening. "It's not a test. It's a warning. Matteo's making his move."

The inheritance property was left under the care of a long-standing family friend of Mia's father—a lawyer named Edward Castellanos. He's loyal, but his resources are stretched thin. While Edward oversees the property and its day-to-day matters, the security arrangements have been bolstered by my men since Mia and I uncovered its strategic importance.

The property isn't just leverage; it's the key to Matteo's empire. Inside lies a hidden ledger—a document that could dismantle his entire operation. If Matteo gets his hands on it, this war will become unwinnable. And now, thanks to Dominic's cryptic warnings and Mia's growing determination, the property has become a battleground.

Across from me, my men exchange tense glances. They understand the stakes, but

they don't know the history. Not like I do.

"I want a triple guard rotation at the property," I say, my voice cutting through the room. "Every entrance, every inch of the perimeter—covered."

Leo hesitates, his hand hovering over the map. "Carlito, there's something else. Matteo's forming alliances of his own. If we want to hold that property, we're going to need backup."

I narrow my eyes. "From who?"

He hesitates, then says, "The Calderone faction. They've stayed neutral, but they hate Matteo almost as much as we do. If there's a chance to sway them—"

"I'll handle it," I cut in. "Set up a meeting."

Leo nods, but his tension doesn't ease. I can tell he's questioning my judgment, wondering why I'm personally handling this instead of delegating it. But there's too much history at play for me to leave this in someone else's hands.

I've known Mia's father for years—his reputation, his power—but I never knew he had children until Mia came into my life. It was only after our marriage, when the truth about her family's Mafia ties surfaced, that the pieces fell into place. Her father's legacy is tangled in this war, and now so is Mia.

The living room door creaks open, and Mia steps inside. Her presence instantly shifts the air. She's dressed casually, but there's a determination in her eyes that's impossible to ignore.

"Do you have a second?" she asks, glancing at the men surrounding the table.

I wave Leo and the others away, and they file out silently, though I can feel their unease. When the door closes, Mia approaches the table, her gaze falling on the map.

“You’re planning something,” she says, her tone measured.

“And you’re holding something back,” I counter, folding my arms.

She flinches but doesn’t back down. “I told you what Dominic said. The ledger is what Matteo’s after—it’s his Achilles’ heel. If you take it from him, he loses everything.”

“And yet, you still look like you’re about to run into the fire yourself,” I say, stepping closer. “What aren’t you telling me, Mia?”

Her lips press into a thin line, and for a moment, I think she might actually tell me. But then the wariness returns to her eyes, and she steps back.

“I just want this to end,” she says softly, her voice cracking slightly.

Her vulnerability strikes a chord deep within me, but before I can respond, Leo bursts back in, his expression grim.

“Carlito,” he says urgently. “Matteo’s men just attacked one of our outposts near the property. It’s an ambush.”

Leo’s words send a surge of adrenaline coursing through me. Matteo’s men attacking an outpost near the inheritance property is no coincidence—it’s a calculated move.

“How many casualties?” I ask, already reaching for my jacket.

“Three injured, none dead,” Leo replies quickly. “But they’re pushing closer to the

property. It's only a matter of time before they escalate."

"Prepare the vehicles," I order, my voice sharp. "I want a full detail with me. If Matteo wants to test our defenses, I'll give him an answer he won't forget."

Mia steps forward, her eyes wide with alarm. "Carlito, you can't just charge into this. It's what Matteo wants."

I stop, turning to face her. "And what would you have me do? Wait for him to burn everything down around us?"

Her jaw tightens, but she doesn't back down. "This isn't just about the property or the ledger anymore, is it? It's about power. You're letting him bait you."

I step closer, lowering my voice. "This isn't about power. It's about survival—yours, mine, and our child's. If Matteo takes that property, we lose our leverage. And if we lose leverage, we lose everything."

Her gaze falters for a moment, but then she squares her shoulders. "Then let me come with you."

The suggestion is so absurd, I almost laugh. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?" she demands, her voice rising. "This is my family's legacy, my fight just as much as yours. You said you wanted me to trust you—then trust me to handle this."

I shake my head, frustration boiling beneath the surface. "This isn't about trust, Mia. It's about keeping you alive."

"And what about you?" she counters, her voice trembling. "You think throwing

yourself into a war zone is the answer? If you die, what happens to us? To our child?"

Her words hit harder than any bullet, but I don't let it show. "That's exactly why I'm doing this," I say, my voice softer now. "Because I can't lose you. Either of you."

The tension between us is palpable, but before the argument can escalate, Leo clears his throat from the doorway. "Vehicles are ready."

I glance back at Mia, her expression a mixture of anger and desperation. "Stay here," I say firmly. "No arguments."

For a moment, it looks like she might defy me, but then she nods stiffly, her lips pressed into a thin line.

I turn and follow Leo out of the penthouse, the weight of the confrontation settling heavily on my shoulders. As the elevator descends, Leo hands me a tablet displaying live footage from the property's perimeter.

"They're pushing hard," he says grimly. "We've reinforced the main gates, but if they breach the east side—"

"They won't," I interrupt. "Not if we hit them first."

The convoy speeds through the city, the tension inside the car thick enough to cut with a knife. My men exchange glances, their hands hovering near their weapons.

"Do you really think Matteo will risk exposing himself like this?" Leo asks quietly.

I shake my head. "This isn't about exposure. It's about making a statement. He's testing our limits, trying to force our hand. But he's underestimated mine."

When we reach the property's outskirts, the scene is pure chaos. Smoke rises from the eastern fence, where Matteo's men are exchanging fire with my guards. The crack of gunfire echoes through the air, mingling with the shouts of commands and cries of pain.

I step out of the vehicle, surveying the battlefield with a cold, calculating eye. Matteo's men are better armed than I expected, but their numbers are manageable.

"Flank the east side," I order, pointing to the far end of the property. "Force them into the open. I want this finished quickly."

Leo nods, already relaying orders to the team.

As my men move into position, I can't help but glance back at the city skyline in the distance. Mia is somewhere in that penthouse, likely pacing the floor, her worry almost tangible.

For her, for our child, and for the legacy tied to this property, I can't afford to lose.

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The east side of the property is chaos as my men execute the flanking maneuver. Matteo's crew, realizing they're outmaneuvered, start to scatter. But I'm not here to let anyone escape.

"Cut off their exit!" I bark into the comms. "No one leaves without answers."

A sharp explosion rips through the air, sending debris flying. I duck behind a low wall, my instincts sharp as shouts echo through the comms.

"East gate compromised!" one of my men calls out.

“Hold your positions!” Leo orders from his end, his voice calm but commanding.

I stand, peering over the fence. Matteo’s men are retreating, but their escape is methodical, covering each other with suppressive fire. It’s not a disorganized retreat—it’s calculated.

“They’re drawing us in,” I mutter to Leo as he crouches beside me.

He nods grimly. “They want us to overcommit.”

“Not happening,” I reply, gripping my gun tighter. “Push them back, but don’t overextend. Force them to regroup outside the perimeter.”

The sound of gunfire begins to fade as my men secure the perimeter. Matteo’s crew retreats into the surrounding desert, disappearing like ghosts. My guards begin sweeping the area, ensuring no threats remain.

Leo approaches, his face drawn with tension. “Three of ours injured, but nothing fatal. They hit us hard, but it wasn’t a full assault. This was a warning.”

“A warning,” I echo, the words bitter in my mouth. “Matteo’s testing our response. He’s trying to buy time.”

“For what?” Leo asks, his voice low.

I don’t answer immediately, my gaze fixed on the scorched ground near the breached gate. Matteo doesn’t play games without purpose. Whatever his endgame is, it’s tied to the inheritance property—and the ledger Mia uncovered.

The weight of that knowledge settles heavily on my shoulders. I promised Mia I’d protect her, but this battle has only just begun.

“Double the security on the property,” I finally say. “No one gets within a mile without my approval.”

Leo nods, already relaying the order to the team.

As I head back to the convoy, my thoughts drift to Mia. She deserves to know what’s happening here, but how much can I really tell her without putting her in more danger?

When we arrive back at the penthouse, the weight of the day hits me harder than I expect. I step out of the elevator, the tension in my chest easing slightly at the sight of Mia pacing the living room.

She stops when she sees me, her hazel eyes scanning me for signs of injury. “You’re okay,” she says, her voice soft with relief.

I nod, walking toward her. “It was a skirmish, not a battle. Matteo’s testing us, but he won’t win.”

Her expression tightens at his name. “And the property?”

“Secure, for now,” I reply. “But it’s only a matter of time before he makes his next move.”

Mia steps closer, her hand brushing against mine. “Carlito... we can’t keep reacting. We have to take control of this.”

Her words hit a nerve, echoing my own thoughts. I pull her into a brief embrace, the warmth of her presence grounding me.

“You’re right,” I say quietly. “But we do it my way. No risks. No unnecessary



moves.”

Mia hesitates but nods, her trust in me a fragile thread I can’t afford to break.

As she pulls away, her gaze lingers on mine. “We’re running out of time, Carlito. Whatever Matteo’s planning, he’s not going to stop.”

Neither will I.

The resolve hardens in my chest as I kiss her forehead and head toward the study. Leo’s waiting with another report, his expression grim.

“It’s not just about the property anymore,” he says. “Matteo’s putting pressure on every front—our allies, our businesses, even our supply chains. He’s tightening the noose.”

A cold fury burns through me. Matteo isn’t just after the property—he’s trying to dismantle everything I’ve built.

“Then it’s time to stop playing defense,” I say, my voice low but firm. “If Matteo wants a war, we’ll give him one. And we’ll end it on our terms.”

### Chapter 27

Mia

The study feels colder than usual, its opulent decor unable to mask the tension weighing down the air. I sit at the wide mahogany desk, my hands trembling as I unfold yet another letter from the stack my father left behind. Each word on the aged paper feels like a ghost, whispering secrets I never knew existed.

The letter begins innocently enough, my father addressing my mother in a tone that hints at regret. But as I read further, the truth emerges like a dagger from the shadows. He had planned to use the ledger—evidence of Matteo's illegal dealings—as a weapon. The ledger was meant to be his bargaining chip, his last attempt to end Matteo's reign of terror and secure a better future for me and my mother.

But the plan failed.

My father writes of betrayal, of allies who turned on him and deals that collapsed under Matteo's relentless pressure. He feared for our lives, his desperation evident in every line. "If this falls into Matteo's hands," he wrote, "he will have the power to destroy us all."

I clutch the letter tightly, my heart pounding. The inheritance property isn't just a sentimental piece of land—it's a battleground. And the ledger is the weapon everyone's vying for.

The sound of footsteps echoes faintly in the hallway, and I quickly fold the letter, tucking it back into the stack. My hand lingers over the papers, the weight of their importance pressing heavily on my chest.

I can feel Carlito's presence before I hear him enter the room. He steps into the study, his sharp gaze sweeping over me and the desk. "You've been in here all morning," he says, his voice tinged with concern.

"I needed time to think," I reply, trying to keep my tone steady. "About everything."

Carlito moves closer, his expression softening as he stops beside me. "I understand," he says quietly. "This isn't easy—for either of us."

For a moment, I consider telling him what I've just discovered, but the memory of our argument last night still lingers. The way his protectiveness clashed with my independence. How can I tell him I'm thinking of leaving the safety of this penthouse to confront the ghosts of my family's past?

Carlito places a hand on my shoulder, grounding me in the present. "If there's something you're not saying, Mia, you can tell me," he says, his tone gentle but firm. "We're in this together."

I look up at him, the weight of my secret threatening to spill over. But I can't. Not yet. Not when I don't have all the answers.

Instead, I nod, offering him a faint smile. "I know," I whisper.

He hesitates, his dark eyes searching mine, before nodding. "I'll leave you to it," he says, turning toward the door.

As he leaves, I release a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. My gaze drifts back to

the letters on the desk, my father's words echoing in my mind.

This isn't just a fight for survival. It's a fight for justice.

I reach for another letter, my resolve hardening. Whatever secrets this ledger holds, I have to uncover them. Not just for my father's sake—but for Carlito's. For our child's. For the future I refuse to let Matteo destroy.

I pace the room, the letters now spread across the desk like fragments of a puzzle. My father's words point to the ledger's importance, but nowhere does he explain exactly where it's hidden. All he mentions is the inheritance property—a place I've never seen but now feels like the center of everything.

The weight of the decision ahead presses on me. Dominic's warnings echo in my mind, but they're tangled with Carlito's reassurances, his fierce determination to shield me from harm. Yet, how can I stay in this gilded cage when the truth—and the danger—is out there?

I glance at the clock on the wall. It's late afternoon now, and I can hear faint voices coming from the living room—Carlito speaking to Leo, no doubt planning their next move. Their words are muffled, but the tension carries through the walls.

My gaze shifts back to the letters, one phrase standing out as if illuminated: "The truth will protect you, even when I can't."

I sit down, picking up the most recent letter again, my father's handwriting growing shakier toward the end. He wrote about the ledger as though it were more than just evidence; it was a weapon. Whatever the ledger contains it must have the power to take down Matteo's empire.

The door creaks open behind me, and I turn quickly to see Carlito standing in the

doorway again. His dark eyes take in the spread of papers on the desk before locking onto mine.

“It’s late now Mia, you’ve been in here for hours. What are you doing?” he asks again, his voice measured but edged with suspicion.

I hesitate, the weight of my secret pressing down on me. But something in his expression—a vulnerability beneath his hardened exterior—makes me falter.

“I’m trying to understand,” I admit quietly, gesturing to the letters. “About my father. About why he left all of this behind for me.”

Carlito steps into the room, his presence commanding yet careful, as though he doesn’t want to shatter the fragile calm between us. “Your father was a complicated man,” he says, his voice softening. “He wanted to protect you from this world, but in doing so, he left you vulnerable to it.”

I nod, his words resonating with the letters I’ve read. “He wrote about the ledger,” I say cautiously, watching for his reaction. “About how it could take down Matteo.”

Carlito stiffens slightly, his jaw tightening. “And you believe it’s still there? Hidden on the property?”

“Yes,” I reply, my voice steadier now. “And if Matteo gets it first...”

“I won’t let that happen,” he interrupts, his tone firm. He moves closer, his hand brushing mine as he leans against the desk. “But you need to trust me, Mia. If we’re going to get through this, we have to do it together.”

I want to believe him, but the memory of Dominic’s words lingers: “Matteo isn’t the only threat you need to worry about.”

I swallow hard, forcing the doubt from my voice. “I trust you, Carlito. But this ledger... it’s part of my father’s legacy. I need to see it for myself.”

His expression shifts, a mix of frustration and understanding. “I know,” he says after a moment. “And I’ll make sure you do. But not alone.”

### Chapter 28

#### Carlito

The penthouse is eerily quiet as I step into the living room, my footsteps muted against the marble floor. A quick glance at the clock on the wall tells me it's barely dawn, but something feels off. The air feels charged, a storm brewing just beneath the surface.

Leo's voice crackles through the living room, cutting into my thoughts. "Carlito, we've got a problem."

The knot in my chest tightens. "What now?" I snap.

"It's Mia," Leo says, his tone low but urgent. "She's gone."

The words stop me cold. "Gone?" I repeat, disbelief and anger mixing into a volatile cocktail.

"She left sometime during the night. We've traced her heading toward the inheritance property."

Every muscle in my body coils tight, my mind racing. "How the hell did this happen? We have security everywhere!"

"She was careful," Leo replies grimly. "There's no sign of forced entry or alarms triggered. Looks like she slipped past us."

Mia. Her determination is both maddening and admirable, but this time, it's outright reckless.

I slam my fist onto the desk, the impact rattling the items on it. "Send men after her. Now."

Leo hesitates. "She's already got a head start, and Matteo's forces are mobilizing near the property. We'll need to act fast."

"I'll handle it," I bark. "Assemble the team and prepare the vehicles. I'll meet you downstairs."

The call ends, leaving me in the suffocating silence of my own thoughts.

She left without telling me. Without trusting me.

The anger simmering beneath my skin flares into something sharper, but beneath it lies fear—a fear I can't shake. If Matteo gets to her before I do...

I shake the thought away and head toward the bedroom. The bed is neatly made, the faintest trace of her perfume lingering in the air. On the nightstand, I spot a folded note. My stomach sinks as I pick it up, unfolding the paper to reveal Mia's delicate handwriting:

"I'm sorry, Carlito. I have to do this. Trust me."

The words blur as a thousand emotions collide within me. She's brave, I'll give her that. But bravery without caution is a death sentence.

I crumple the note in my hand, the paper biting into my palm as I leave the room.



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In the vehicle, Leo sits across from me, his expression tight. “Matteo’s forces are scattered but closing in near the property. We estimate they’ll make their move within the next few hours.”

I nod, staring out the window as the cityscape blurs into the horizon beyond. The roads ahead are empty, but the weight in my chest feels anything but.

Mia’s resolve reminds me of her father’s. Bold, unyielding, and dangerously reckless. It’s what made him both a formidable ally and a challenging adversary.

But she’s not her father. She’s mine to protect. Mine to keep safe.

“Contact our men at the property,” I say, my voice cold and sharp. “Tell them to hold their ground until I get there.”

Leo nods, but there’s a flicker of unease in his eyes. “And Mia?”

I meet his gaze, my own unflinching. “She’s not going anywhere. Not while I’m alive.”

The car speeds down the empty road, the rising sun casting long shadows over the horizon. Each mile brings me closer to the property—and closer to whatever fate awaits us there.

The desert stretches endlessly, the barren landscape offering no solace. My thoughts churn as the car hums beneath me, each second ticking away like a bomb ready to explode.

“She’s smart,” Leo says, breaking the silence. “If Mia’s gone there, it’s because she

thinks she can help.”

“Help?” I bite out the word like it’s poison. “Walking into Matteo’s crosshairs isn’t helping—it’s suicide.”

Leo leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “She knows about the ledger now. If she thinks she can get to it before Matteo, maybe she’s trying to end this her way.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” I snap. “She’s trying to do it alone. If Matteo finds her—”

I don’t finish the thought. The very idea twists in my chest, leaving a sharp ache behind.

“She doesn’t understand what he’s capable of,” I continue, more to myself than to Leo. “Matteo doesn’t negotiate. He takes what he wants, and he leaves destruction behind.”

“And you think she doesn’t see that?” Leo challenges gently. “She’s not blind, Carlito. She’s fighting for what she believes in, just like you.”

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The convoy of black SUVs comes into view as we approach the property’s perimeter. Armed guards stand at attention, their faces grim under the early morning light.

I step out of the car, the desert air cool against my skin. Leo follows, a clipboard in hand as he begins coordinating with the men.

“Any signs of Matteo’s forces?” I ask one of the guards, my voice cutting through the hum of activity.

“Scouts spotted movement about three miles west,” the guard replies. “We’re tracking them, but they’re holding position for now.”

“They’re waiting for something,” I mutter.

Leo steps up beside me. “Or someone.”

My jaw tightens as I scan the horizon, the faint outlines of hills and scrubland offering little comfort. Somewhere out there, Mia is walking straight into danger, and every second she’s ahead feels like an eternity.

“Double the patrols,” I order. “I want eyes on every possible approach. If they make a move, we hit them hard and fast.”

The men nod and scatter to carry out my orders.

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As the guards fan out, my thoughts return to Mia. I can almost see her, stubborn and determined, her hazel eyes alight with the fire that drew me to her in the first place. She’s not just brave—she’s relentless. And that’s what terrifies me the most.

“She’s more like her father than she realizes,” I repeat under my breath.

Leo glances at me, his expression unreadable. “You loved him once,” he says. “As an ally. Maybe even as a friend.”

I nod slowly, my gaze fixed on the distant horizon. “I did. But love isn’t enough to save someone from themselves.”

A sharp whistle cuts through the air, drawing my attention back to the guards. One of

them jogs toward us, his face pale.

“We’ve got movement,” he says, his voice tight. “Multiple vehicles approaching from the west.”

My heart pounds as I pull my phone from my pocket, dialing Mia’s number for what seems like the hundredth time.

“Mia,” I murmur, my voice low and urgent as the call connects. “Where the hell are you?”

There’s a long pause before Mia’s voice comes through, quieter than I expected. “I’m almost there.”

The breath I didn’t realize I was holding escapes in a sharp exhale. “Turn around. Right now.”

“I can’t, Carlito,” she says, her tone firm despite the tremor I detect beneath it. “This is bigger than us. I need to do this.”

“No,” I growl, the edge in my voice cutting even to my own ears. “You think you’re protecting everyone, but all you’re doing is walking straight into Matteo’s hands.”

Her silence is answer enough.

I glance at Leo, who’s already gesturing for the convoy to prepare for immediate movement. “You’re not alone in this, Mia,” I say, lowering my voice. “Whatever you think you’ll find, it’s not worth your life. Let me help you.”

“You’ll try to stop me,” she says softly.

“Damn right I will,” I bite out.

She doesn’t respond, and the line goes dead.

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“Track her phone,” I bark at Leo, my pulse pounding in my ears.

“She’s close,” Leo says, glancing at the digital map on his tablet. “If we move now, we can intercept her before Matteo does.”

“Then we move,” I say, climbing back into the SUV. The engine roars to life, and the convoy surges forward, dust rising in our wake.

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As we near the property, the tension thickens. The landscape is eerily quiet, the distant hum of engines the only sound. My grip tightens on the steering wheel, every muscle in my body coiled and ready.

“She’s heading straight for the main entrance,” Leo says, his tone clipped. “Matteo’s men are approaching from the west. If we don’t cut them off—”

“We will,” I interrupt, my voice steel.

The road curves, and the property comes into view—a sprawling estate surrounded by high walls and a wrought-iron gate. My heart sinks when I spot Mia’s car parked near the entrance.

I slam the brakes, the SUV skidding to a stop. “Stay back,” I tell Leo, my tone sharper than intended, as I leap out. My eyes sweep the grounds, scanning for any

sign of her. The silence presses against me.

“Mia!” I shout, the force of my voice ricocheting off the high walls. My pulse pounds in my ears, the uncertainty gnawing at my focus.

The creak of the front door snaps my attention forward, and there she is—standing in the doorway with an envelope clutched tightly in her hands. Relief wars with frustration as I close the distance between us.

“Carlito,” she says, her voice steady but her wide eyes betray her urgency. “I found it.”

“What did you find?” I demand, my tone harsher than I mean it to be.

Her grip on the envelope tightens. “Matteo’s ledger,” she breathes. “It’s real. It’s everything Dominic said it would be.”

Her words are a spark on dry timber. My thoughts whirl with the implications, but before I can process, the sharp crack of a gunshot cuts through the air.

“Down!” I roar, grabbing Mia and pulling her behind the cover of the SUV as dust explodes around us. More shots follow in rapid succession, the unmistakable sound of a coordinated assault.

“Mia, stay behind me!” I command, my tone leaving no room for argument.

Matteo’s men emerge from the horizon, their movements methodical and precise. My instincts take over as I draw my weapon, returning fire with deadly accuracy.

### Chapter 29

Mia

The crack of gunfire echoes through the dense air, each shot slicing through the fragile calm like a blade. Carlito shields me, his body a fortress against the chaos erupting around us. My heart pounds as I clutch the envelope to my chest, the weight of its secrets pressing into my skin.

“Stay low!” Carlito barks, his voice sharp and commanding. He pulls me tighter against the SUV, shielding me as the relentless assault continues.

“Carlito,” I whisper, my voice trembling but firm, “this ledger—it’s the key. We can’t lose it.”

“I know,” he growls, his focus fixed on the enemy advancing toward us. “And we won’t.”

Leo appears at Carlito’s side, his expression grim. “We’ve got a solid perimeter, but they’re pushing hard. We need to secure the property.”

Carlito nods, his jaw tight. “Get the men in position. No one breaches this line.”

Leo hesitates, his eyes flicking toward me before he moves. “Keep her safe, boss.”

Carlito’s hand brushes mine briefly, a fleeting moment of connection amid the chaos. “Stay with me,” he says, his voice softer now.

I nod, the ledger pressed tightly against me. “I’m not going anywhere.”

A deafening explosion rocks the ground, and I instinctively duck, my ears ringing from the blast. Carlito pulls me down beside him, his arm steadying me as debris rains around us.

Through the haze of smoke, figures emerge—Matteo’s men, armed and relentless. My stomach churns as I see their cold, calculated movements. This isn’t just an attack. It’s a message.

“Carlito,” I whisper, my voice barely audible above the gunfire, “Dominic said Matteo wouldn’t stop until he has this. He’s coming for all of us.”

Carlito’s eyes flash with fury. “Let him try,” he snarls. “He doesn’t get to take anything more from us.”

Another round of gunfire tears through the air, forcing us lower. Carlito shifts, positioning himself between me and the danger. “When I give the signal,” he says, his tone urgent, “you run for the house. Do you understand?”

“No,” I protest, gripping his arm. “I’m not leaving you.”

His gaze softens briefly, but his resolve is unshakable. “Mia, you have to. The ledger—Matteo can’t get his hands on it. We’re not just fighting for ourselves anymore. We’re fighting for what comes next.”

Tears sting my eyes, but I nod. “I’ll run when you say,” I whisper, my throat tight.

The battle surges, chaos swallowing us whole. But Carlito’s presence anchors me, his determination a lifeline in the storm.



For a brief moment, I allow myself to believe that we'll survive this—that the ledger, our child, and everything we've fought for will endure.

But as a shadowy figure steps into view, a rifle aimed directly at us, my breath catches. It's Matteo himself, his presence colder than the gun in his hands.

Carlito stiffens, his body tense with recognition. "Stay behind me," he commands, his voice a deadly whisper.

Matteo smiles, a predator circling his prey. "You've fought well, Carlito," he says, his tone mocking. "But it ends here."

The ledger feels heavier in my grasp, its secrets burning against my skin. As the enemy closes in, I realize there's no turning back.

This is it. The fight for everything.

Carlito shifts his stance, his entire body braced like a shield. "If you think I'll let you win, you're more delusional than I thought," he snarls at Matteo, his voice cutting through the chaos like a blade.

Matteo's smirk widens, his gun still trained on us. "You've already lost, Carlito. That ledger belongs to me, just like everything your pathetic empire once touched."

Before Carlito can respond, a deafening explosion erupts from the far side of the property, sending dirt and debris flying into the air. The ground trembles beneath us, and I clutch the envelope tighter, my knuckles white against its edges.

"Leo!" Carlito shouts, his voice barely audible over the roar.

Leo appears through the haze, blood streaking his temple but his stance unyielding.

“We’ve got reinforcements coming,” he says breathlessly. “But Matteo’s pushing harder than we expected.”

Carlito’s jaw tightens, and his eyes flick toward me. “Mia, now’s your chance. Get to the house. Lock yourself in and don’t come out until I get you.”

“No,” I say fiercely, stepping closer to him. “I’m not running.”

“Mia—” His voice breaks, the fear beneath his frustration flashing in his dark eyes.

“Carlito, I’m not leaving you,” I insist, my grip tightening on his arm.

Before he can argue further, a gunshot whizzes past us, embedding into the side of the SUV. Matteo’s men are closing in, their advance relentless.

Carlito pulls me into a crouch, his eyes blazing with frustration and fear. “Stay low,” he orders, his tone leaving no room for debate.

As the battle intensifies, I watch Carlito command his men with precision and authority, his presence a beacon amid the chaos. His every move is calculated, his determination unwavering.

But Matteo isn’t backing down. He steps closer, his men flanking him like a wall of muscle and firepower.

“You can’t win this, Carlito,” Matteo sneers, his voice laced with venom. “Hand over the ledger, and I might consider letting you crawl away with your life.”

Carlito lets out a sharp, humorless laugh. “You don’t get to make demands, Matteo. Not here. Not ever.”

The tension between them is electric, the weight of their rivalry palpable. I can feel the history between them, the years of hatred and betrayal simmering to the surface.

Suddenly, a familiar figure emerges from the shadows, his presence cutting through the smoke like a ghost. Dominic.

My breath catches as he strides forward, his expression grim and resolute. He holds a weapon at his side, his movements deliberate but measured.

“Dominic,” Matteo growls, his eyes narrowing. “What the hell are you doing?”

Dominic doesn’t answer immediately. His gaze flickers to me, then to Carlito, before finally settling on Matteo.

“What I should have done a long time ago,” he says, his voice low but firm.

Matteo’s face contorts with fury, his gun shifting toward Dominic. “You dare betray me?”

Dominic doesn’t flinch. Instead, he raises his weapon, his aim steady. “You’ll never get the ledger,” he says, his tone filled with finality.

The tension snaps like a taut wire, and the air erupts in gunfire once more. Dominic moves with precision, placing himself between us and Matteo’s men, his actions speaking louder than any words ever could.

I cling to Carlito as the battle rages on, the weight of the ledger pressing against my chest like a lifeline. For the first time, I see Dominic for what he truly is—not just a brother, but a man searching for redemption.

And in this moment, he’s risking everything to protect us.

The battlefield erupts into chaos, the relentless exchange of gunfire drowning out all other sound. Dominic moves like a shadow, his focus unyielding as he shields Carlito and me from Matteo's advancing men.

Matteo's voice cuts through the cacophony. "You think this changes anything, Dominic? Betraying me only ensures your death."

Dominic's jaw tightens, but he doesn't respond. Instead, he takes down one of Matteo's guards with a precise shot, his expression a mix of fury and grim determination.

Carlito seizes the opportunity, motioning for Leo and the rest of the men to flank Matteo's remaining forces. The tide begins to shift as Matteo's men falter, their leader's desperation growing more evident with each passing second.

Matteo raises his weapon, aiming directly at Carlito. Time slows as I see the intent in his eyes—the hatred, the need to destroy everything Carlito stands for.

"No!" I scream, stepping in front of Carlito without thinking.

But Dominic is faster. He lunges forward, shoving me aside and placing himself directly in Matteo's line of fire. The gunshot rings out, and Dominic staggers, blood blossoming on his side.

"Dominic!" I cry, rushing to his side as he collapses to the ground.

Carlito grabs Matteo's wrist, twisting the gun from his grasp with a brutal efficiency that sends it clattering to the ground. He forces Matteo to his knees, pinning him with a grip of steel.

"You're done, Matteo," Carlito growls, his voice low and venomous. "It's over."

Matteo sneers, blood dripping from a cut on his temple. “You think this ends with me? My empire is bigger than you, Carlito. Kill me, and you’ll only ignite the war you’ve been trying to avoid.”

Carlito’s grip tightens, his knuckles white against Matteo’s collar. For a moment, I think he might pull the trigger.

But then he glances at me—at the fear and exhaustion etched into my face—and something shifts in his eyes.

“No,” Carlito says, his voice steady. “You’re not worth it.”

He gestures to Leo, who steps forward and secures Matteo’s hands behind his back. “Take him alive. We’ll handle this the right way.”

Matteo snarls, his defiance unbroken. “You’ll regret this, Carlito. I swear it.”

Carlito ignores him, his focus shifting to Dominic, who lies slumped against a fallen crate. I’m already at his side, pressing my hands against the wound on his side in a desperate attempt to stem the bleeding.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I whisper, my voice trembling.

Dominic’s lips curl into a faint, pained smile. “Maybe I did,” he says hoarsely. “For once, I wanted to do something right.”

Carlito kneels beside us, his expression a mix of gratitude and sorrow. “You saved her,” he says, his voice tight with emotion. “You saved us.”

Dominic’s eyes flicker to Carlito. “She’s my sister,” he murmurs. “Protect her, Carlito. Don’t let this world take her like it took me.”

Tears blur my vision as I press harder against the wound, but Dominic's strength is fading.

"Stay with me," I plead, my voice cracking. "Please, Dominic."

But Dominic's gaze softens, his breath shallow. "You're stronger than you think, Mia," he whispers. "Don't forget that."

With one final, shuddering breath, Dominic's body goes still.

A sob wrenches free from my chest, and Carlito's hand grips my shoulder, grounding me as the weight of loss crashes over us.

In the distance, Matteo is hauled away by Carlito's men, his shouts fading into the background. The battle is over, but the scars it leaves behind will linger long after the dust has settled.

Carlito helps me to my feet, his arms steady around me. "We'll finish this, Mia," he promises, his voice firm. "For him. For us."

I nod, clutching the ledger against my chest like a lifeline. The fight isn't over, but for the first time, I feel the stirrings of hope.

Together, we'll face whatever comes next.

### Chapter 30

#### Carlito

The room hums with low, tense murmurs. The chamber is steeped in shadows, illuminated only by a single hanging light that casts stark contrasts on the faces of the Mafia council seated in a semicircle. Matteo sits at the center of it all, bound to a chair, his suit torn and bloodstained but his demeanor unbroken. His defiance simmers beneath his glare, but I know better than anyone the weight of his situation has finally sunk in.

Leo steps forward, handing me the leather-bound ledger. I open it deliberately, letting the rustle of aged paper cut through the tension. The weight of this moment is not lost on me; this isn't just about Matteo. It's about the years of deceit, the lives lost, and the empire he sought to dismantle from within.

"This," I say, holding up a page covered in handwritten entries, "is what your loyalty to Matteo bought you. Dirty money, backdoor deals, alliances forged in the shadows—all of it recorded in meticulous detail."

I toss the ledger onto the table in front of the council, the sound sharp and final. "This is the proof of Matteo Russo's betrayal. Not just to me but to all of us."

A ripple of agreement passes through the room, quiet but unmistakable.

"You think this makes you better than me?" Matteo sneers, his voice hoarse but steady. "We're all the same, Carlito. You just hide it better."

I step closer, my hands gripping the edges of the table as I lean in. “The difference between us, Matteo, is that I know the line between ambition and treachery. You crossed it the moment you put your greed above the family.”

His gaze flickers, just for a second, and I know I’ve hit a nerve.

As the council deliberates, I glance at the empty chair that should have been Dominic’s. His absence cuts deeper than I expected. He made his choice, sacrificing himself to save Mia and me, and in doing so, proved that even in the darkness of this world, redemption is possible.

Mia’s face flashes in my mind—her quiet grief, the way she clutched his bloodstained hand in the aftermath. It’s a wound I can’t heal for her, but it fuels my resolve. For her and our child, I’ll ensure this ends here.

The head of the Mafia council raises his hand, and the murmurs cease. “The evidence is clear,” he announces, his voice carrying the weight of finality. “Matteo Russo, you have broken the code of loyalty. Your punishment will be exile from the council and the forfeiture of your assets.”

A collective exhale sweeps through the room, but my chest remains tight. Exile isn’t death, but for Matteo, it’s close enough. He won’t last long without the protection of the council.

“Take him,” I order, my voice cold and detached. Two guards step forward, dragging Matteo to his feet.

As he’s led away, Matteo turns his head, his bloodied lips twisting into a smirk. “This isn’t over, Carlito,” he hisses. “You’ll see.”

I watch him disappear into the shadows, my fists clenched at my sides. Whatever



Matteo has left to fight with, it won't be enough—not while I have Mia to fight for.

The heavy doors to the council chamber close behind me with a resounding thud. Outside, the cold night air bites at my skin, but it's a welcome contrast to the stifling tension inside. Matteo's words linger in my mind like an unwanted echo, but I push them aside. His downfall is complete, and his empire is dismantled—retribution has been served.

As I walk toward the waiting car, my thoughts drift to Mia. She's been my anchor through this chaos, even as the storm has threatened to pull us apart. Dominic's death weighs on her, I know. She's carried herself with strength, but I've seen the moments where her guard falters—her quiet stares, the way she presses a hand to her stomach as if grounding herself.

Leo stands by the car, his expression a mixture of relief and wariness. "It's done," he says simply as I approach.

I nod. "What about Mia?"

"She's back at the penthouse," Leo replies. "She asked not to be disturbed."

For a moment, I hesitate. The weight of everything we've endured presses down on me, and I wonder if she's ready to let me back in. But this isn't the time for doubt. Not with what we've survived—and not with what lies ahead.

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The penthouse is quiet when I arrive, the soft hum of the city beyond the windows the only sound. I find Mia in the living room, curled up on the couch with a blanket draped over her legs. She looks up as I enter, her eyes meeting mine with a mixture of exhaustion and something deeper—relief, maybe, or a fragile hope.

“You’re back,” she says softly, setting aside the book she hasn’t been reading.

“I am.” I cross the room, sitting beside her. For a moment, we just sit there, the silence between us speaking louder than words.

“I heard what happened,” she says after a while. “The trial. Matteo.”

“It’s over,” I tell her, though the words feel heavier than they should. “He’s been exiled. He won’t come after us again.”

Her gaze drops to her hands, folded neatly in her lap. “And Dominic?”

I take her hand in mine, my grip firm but gentle. “He made his choice, Mia. He wanted to protect you—and he did.”

Her breath hitches, and I see the glimmer of tears in her eyes. “He didn’t deserve to die like that,” she whispers.

“No, he didn’t.” My voice is quiet, the truth heavy between us.

Mia leans into me, her head resting on my shoulder. It’s a small gesture, but it speaks volumes. We’ve been through so much together, and yet, in this moment, we find solace in each other’s presence. I tighten my arm around her, pulling her closer, and she sighs, a sound that is both weary and content.

Gently, I lift her chin, my thumb brushing against her soft skin. Her eyes, shimmering with unshed tears, meet mine, and I see the determination and resilience that have always drawn me to her. “Mia, listen to me,” I say, my voice low and intense. “Whatever comes next, we face it together. No more secrets, no more hiding. We’re in this together.”

Her lips quiver, and for a moment, I think she might break down. But then, with a deep breath, she nods, her eyes holding mine with unwavering resolve. "I'm with you, Carlito. Always."

I pull her close, my lips finding hers in a kiss that is both tender and passionate. Mia responds eagerly, her hands threading through my hair, pulling me closer. The kiss deepens, our tongues dancing, and I taste the sweetness of her mouth, the warmth of her breath. My hands roam over her body, tracing the curves of her waist, the softness of her hips. I want to erase the pain and fear from her, to replace it with pleasure and desire.

As our kiss intensifies, I stand, lifting her effortlessly into my arms. She giggles, a light, musical sound, as I carry her toward the bedroom and kick the door open with my foot, my focus entirely on Mia.

Lowering her onto the bed, I follow, my body covering hers, our lips never breaking contact. Her hands roam under my shirt, her fingertips tracing the muscles of my back, sending shivers down my spine. I groan into her mouth, my hands moving to the buttons of her blouse, eager to feel her skin against mine.

With deft fingers, I undo the buttons, revealing her lacy black bra and the swell of her breasts. I kiss my way down her neck, nipping and sucking gently, making her arch into me with a soft moan. Her skin tastes like honey, and I want to devour her, to mark her as mine.

"Carlito," she breathes, her voice husky with desire. "Please..."

I smile against her skin, my hands cupping her breasts, thumbs brushing over her hardened nipples. "Patience, baby. I want to savor every moment."

I kiss my way down her body, my tongue tracing the valley between her breasts,

making her squirm beneath me. Her scent, a mixture of perfume and desire, fills my senses, driving me wild. I unhook her bra, freeing her breasts, and take one taut peak into my mouth, sucking gently, then harder as she gasps and writhes beneath me.

Mia's hands tug at my belt, her fingers deftly undoing the buckle and sliding my pants down my hips. I raise myself on my elbows, watching as she reveals my straining erection, encased in black silk boxers. Her eyes darken with desire as she runs her fingers along the length of my shaft, making me hiss in pleasure.

"I want you," she whispers, her voice throaty. "Now."

I don't need any further encouragement. I shed my clothes, my eyes never leaving hers, and then I'm over her again, my body aligning with hers. I kiss her deeply, my tongue mimicking the rhythm I intend for our bodies. She wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me closer, her wet heat teasing the tip of my cock.

With one smooth thrust, I fill her, our bodies becoming one. Mia cries out, her nails digging into my back as she adjusts to my size. I hold still, giving her a moment to acclimate, before beginning a slow, steady rhythm.

"Oh my God," she breathes, her head thrown back, her chest heaving. "Yes, just like that."

I oblige, my pace increasing, my hips slamming into hers, our bodies moving in perfect harmony. The bed creaks beneath us, the only other sound our labored breathing and the wet, slick sounds of our coupling. I reach between us, finding her clit, and begin to rub in time with my thrusts.

Mia's orgasm hits her hard, her body tensing, her inner walls clenching around me. I feel her climax ripple through her, and it's my undoing. With a final, powerful thrust, I come, my release spilling into her, our cries of pleasure mingling in the air.

We lie there, entangled in each other's arms, our hearts still racing. I brush the hair from her face, my thumb wiping away a stray tear. "Are you okay?" I ask, my voice hoarse with emotion.

She smiles, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I am now. I needed that... needed you."

I kiss her softly, my heart swelling with love and protectiveness. "Always, baby. I'll always be here for you."

The quiet after the storm settles over the penthouse like a heavy blanket, bringing with it a fragile sense of peace. I stand by the window, watching the lights of Las Vegas shimmer in the distance. Behind me, Mia stirs, wrapping the sheet tighter around her.

"It feels different," she murmurs, her voice soft but steady.

I turn to face her, my brow furrowing. "What does?"

She sits up, the glow of the city casting her features in soft light. "This... us. It feels like we've crossed some line—like everything's changed."

I cross the room, sitting on the edge of the bed. My hand finds hers, our fingers intertwining. "Everything has changed," I admit. "But it doesn't mean it's over. Matteo's gone, but the world we live in... it doesn't forget."

Her eyes search mine, and I see the same determination that first drew me to her. "Then we change it," she says, her voice filled with quiet conviction.

Her words strike something deep within me—a reminder of why I chose her, why I've fought so hard to protect her. She's not just a part of my world; she's redefined

it.

A faint knock at the door pulls us both from the moment. I rise, grabbing a shirt as I cross the room.

Leo stands on the other side, his expression grim but composed. “Here’s the council’s formal document of Matteo’s permanent exile,” he says, handing me a sealed envelope.

I glance at it briefly before nodding. “And the property?”

“Secured. Matteo’s men have been dismantled or scattered. We’ve taken full control.”

“Good.” I step back, dismissing him with a nod.

As I return to the bedroom, Mia watches me carefully. “What was that about?”

“Closure,” I say simply, setting the envelope aside.

She doesn’t press further, and for that, I’m grateful.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm*

The morning light streams through the penthouse windows, painting everything in warm gold. It feels surreal—this moment of calm after the chaos that has defined our lives for so long. I’m sitting in the living room, sipping a cup of tea, when the sound of the elevator door opening makes me pause.

I glance toward the entryway, expecting Leo or one of Carlito’s men. Instead, it’s Bianca. She steps in, her suitcase trailing behind her, her posture firm but her expression unreadable.

“Bianca,” I say, standing quickly. “You’re back?”

“Just for today,” she says, her voice steady. There’s a softness in her eyes, though, a quiet peace that wasn’t there the last time I saw her. “I needed to see you both before I leave for good.”

My stomach tightens at her words, and Carlito appears from his study, his expression immediately sharpening at the sight of her. “Bianca,” he says simply, his tone unreadable.

She gives him a nod. “We need to talk.”

The three of us sit in the living room, the air heavy with unspoken emotions. Bianca rests her hands in her lap, glancing between me and Carlito before speaking. “I’ve made my decision,” she begins, her voice quiet but resolute. “I’m leaving Las Vegas. For good.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she lifts a hand to stop me. “This life... it’s not mine.

It never was. After everything that happened with Dario, I couldn't see it clearly. But now I can. I need to start over somewhere far away from all of this."

Her words hit like a blow, but I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Where will you go?" I ask softly.

"Back to Los Angeles, at least for now," she says. "I've been thinking about starting a business—something small, something mine." Her voice trembles for a moment before she steadies it. "I can't keep living in the shadow of this world. I need to build something outside of it, something that's just me."

Carlito's jaw tightens, but he doesn't speak right away. Finally, he nods. "I can't stop you," he says, his voice low. "But know this: wherever you go, you'll always have my protection. And if you ever need anything—"

"I know," she interrupts, her voice softer now. "And I'm grateful. But I need to do this on my own."

Her gaze shifts to me, her eyes glistening. "Mia, you've always been the brave one. You've fought for this family in ways I never could. And now, you're building one of your own. I'm proud of you."

Tears prick at my eyes as I reach for her hand. "You don't have to go," I whisper, even though I know she does.

"I do," she says gently, squeezing my hand. "But that doesn't mean I'm leaving you. We'll always be sisters."

The weight of her words settles between us, bittersweet but undeniable. As much as it hurts, I know she's doing what's right for her.

Carlito stands, offering her a hand. "Let me arrange for someone to take you to the



airport.”

Bianca shakes her head. “I’ve got it covered. I just wanted to say goodbye properly this time.”

As she leaves the penthouse, I watch her go with a mix of pride and sadness. She’s choosing her path, just as I chose mine.

Bianca’s visit feels like a fleeting moment of warmth, a reminder of what once was and what can never fully return. I sit on the couch, staring at the door she walked through, imagining her stepping into her new life. It’s what she needs, but it doesn’t make her departure any easier to accept.

Carlito sits across from me, his expression unreadable as he swirls a glass of whiskey in his hand. Finally, he breaks the silence. “She’s stronger than I gave her credit for.”

“She’s always been strong,” I reply softly. “She just needed to find a way to be herself without the weight of all this.” I gesture vaguely around the room, encompassing the legacy, the danger, and the ties that bind us.

Carlito nods, his dark eyes thoughtful. “She’s doing what Dario would’ve wanted. Starting fresh. Away from this world.”

At the mention of Dario, my throat tightens. “She deserves it. After everything she’s lost...”

Carlito leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “We all do, Mia. A chance to start over. To build something better.”

I turn to him, searching his face. “Do you think that’s possible? For us?”

His gaze holds steady, filled with the quiet intensity I’ve come to know so well. “It

won't be easy. But nothing worth having ever is."

His words settle between us, and for a moment, the silence is comforting, a shared understanding of the journey ahead. I rise from the couch and walk to the large windows, staring out at the city that has been both our battleground and sanctuary.

"We've survived so much," I say quietly. "But sometimes I wonder if the scars will ever fade."

Carlito stands and joins me, his presence a steady anchor. "Scars don't fade," he says, his voice low but sure. "They remind us of what we've fought for. What we've lost. And what we'll never lose again."

His hand brushes against mine, a small but powerful gesture. I glance at him, his dark eyes reflecting the same hope and determination I feel stirring within me.

Before I can respond, the doorbell chimes, cutting through the stillness. Carlito tenses, but I place a hand on his arm. "It's Leo," I say, already moving to answer it.

Leo steps inside, his usual stoic demeanor softened by a rare smile. "The property is officially all yours now. The security checks have been done twice and it's secured for good"

Relief floods me but it's tempered by the weight of responsibility. "Thank you, Leo," I say, my voice steady.

He nods, his gaze flickering to Carlito. "You've done what no one else could. Now it's time to focus on what comes next."

Leo leaves us alone, and I turn back to Carlito. "He's right. This isn't just about survival anymore. It's about living."

Carlito pulls me close, his hands warm and steady against my back. “Then let’s start now,” he murmurs, his voice a promise.

I nod, feeling the pieces of our lives finally settling into place. Together, we’ve faced the darkness. Now, it’s time to embrace the light.

Carlito leads me to the balcony, the cool evening air carrying a refreshing stillness. Below us, the city glimmers, alive and bustling—a stark contrast to the serene quiet between us. For the first time in weeks, there’s no immediate threat looming, no secrets clawing their way to the surface.

I rest my hands on the railing, looking out at the lights. “Do you think this is what it feels like? To finally start over?”

Carlito steps beside me, his arm brushing mine. “Starting over doesn’t erase the past,” he says, his voice low. “But it gives us the chance to shape something better. For us. For the baby.”

The mention of our child pulls at my heart in a way I didn’t expect. I place a hand over my stomach, a protective instinct rising within me. “I want that more than anything,” I whisper.

Carlito’s hand covers mine, his warmth grounding me. “Then we’ll build it. Together.”

His thumb brushes my cheek, his dark eyes softer than I’ve ever seen them. “You’re incredible, Mia. Stronger than you know.”

I let out a soft laugh, tinged with disbelief. “After everything we’ve been through, I think we both have a new understanding of what strength is.”

Carlito’s lips tug into a faint smile, but his gaze grows more intense. “Strength, yes.

But also trust. I didn't think I could let anyone in the way I've let you in, Mia. You've changed me."

I blink back tears, his words hitting me harder than I expect. "You've changed me too, Carlito. You made me realize I can be more than just... afraid."

His hand tightens on mine as he pulls me closer. "You never have to be afraid again. Not with me."

His kiss takes me by surprise—not rough or desperate, but steady and full of quiet emotion. His lips move against mine as though he's trying to tell me everything he can't put into words.

His hands slide up to cradle my face, thumbs brushing my cheeks as the kiss deepens. There's no urgency, just the quiet, deliberate way he moves, like he's memorizing the moment. My fingers find their way to his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath my touch. He breaks the kiss just long enough to press his forehead against mine, his breath warm against my lips.

"Mia," he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion. "Let me show you how much you mean to me."

I nod, words escaping me, and he lowers his head, his lips tracing a gentle path down my jawline. His hands slide to my waist, steady and grounding, as if anchoring us both in this fragile moment of connection. His touch is soft, reverent, as his lips skim the sensitive skin of my neck, leaving warmth in their wake.

My breath catches as his hand brushes my lower back, pulling me closer until there's no space left between us. I tilt my head back, surrendering to the tenderness of his embrace. It's not about desire or passion—it's about comfort, about trust, about the unspoken promise that whatever comes next, we'll face it together.

Later, as we lie together in the warm glow of the bedroom, Carlito's hand rests lightly on my stomach. His touch is gentle, reverent, and my heart swells at the sight of his dark eyes focused solely on me.

"This is it," he says quietly, his voice carrying a weight I know all too well. "Our chance to make things right. To give our child the life we never had."

I place my hand over his, lacing our fingers together. "And we'll do it, Carlito. No more running, no more fear. Just... us."

The sound of the city hums softly outside, but within these walls, the world feels far away. For the first time in what feels like forever, there's no war to fight, no secrets to unravel—only the quiet promise of a future we'll build together.

The End

Thank you for reading Mafia Don's Twisted Union.