



Masked Mafia's Runaway Bride (Illicit Passion #1)

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Category: Urban

Description: I never planned to marry a monster. But I definitely didn't plan on carrying his son's baby.

Marrying a man older than my father? It wasn't love—it was a business deal, and I was just the price paid to save my family's dying empire.

The night before the ceremony, I screwed up. A stranger's kiss, a touch that lit me on fire and the next morning, my fiancé exposed me.

The footage played for all to see, and chaos erupted. Gunfire. Screams. Blood. When the smoke cleared, my father and the man who saved me had vanished.

So, I ran—pregnant, alone, and determined to never look back.

Years later, whispers about my missing father dragged me back into the world I swore I'd escaped. My plan? Play dumb, get answers, and burn it all down.

It was perfect—until I saw Sergio Don Carlos.

My childhood crush. My enemy's son.

And the man with the same tattoo as the stranger who ruined me that night.

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Page 1

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MIRELLA

“Maybe I should run away or kill myself?”

Funny words, but who was going to pull the trigger? I thought about it for a moment before shrugging the thought away.

I am going to do this. I had no choice. My father was counting on me.

The gown felt heavy, but not as heavy as my heart. I stood at the altar, hands trembling as I clutched the bouquet. The veil obscured my face, but it couldn't hide the tears threatening to spill.

I forced my gaze forward to him, my husband-to-be, my father's best friend, the man I was marrying out of duty, not love. His eyes held pride; mine held nothing.

This wasn't a fairy tale.

It was a merger disguised as a wedding, and for the sake of my father, I was the sacrificial lamb.

The past weeks leading up to this moment had been the worst days of my life. My father's business had hit its all-time low, forcing him to declare bankruptcy. It was a moment, though he dreaded it, we had seen coming from miles away. It started with a reckless financial decision he had made. His severe gambling addiction after my mom died from cancer had played a vital role in it, and now, it has cost me my life. Two weeks ago, Don Carlos, his business partner and best friend, had offered to help.

He had only one condition.

I would be his wife.

That was it. Marry the old, ruthless Mafia Don, and all our problems disappear. It wouldn't have been so dreadful, but I hated Don Carlos to my bones. I loathed, abhorred, and despised him.

And, of course, there was last night, the only night I'd felt real in weeks. I had wandered away from my own last-minute engagement party like a ghost, invisible in a sea of masked faces—irony at its finest, really.

Everyone else had on a mask, and I was the one no one noticed. I'd downed a glass of champagne—or three. I remembered him—the stranger—a man in a dark tuxedo who stood just outside the light, watching me with eyes that seemed familiar. It was familiar in a way that ached in me, stirring something up from the depths.

It was like the moment he caught my eye, the room faded around me. Maybe it was just the champagne, but his gaze was captivating. Too captivating.

“Are you lost?” he asked, his voice smooth as the whiskey I'd have preferred over champagne.

I raised an eyebrow. “I might ask you the same thing.”

He chuckled, low and rich. “No mask,” he observed, nodding toward my bare face. “Risky move.”

“Maybe I like a little risk,” I shot back, feeling uncharacteristically bold. Blame it on the overly priced wine.

His smile widened. It was a smile that melted my soul in a way I had never experienced before. It penetrated deep into me, tearing me bare. “Or maybe you’re just tired of hiding.”

I blinked, and for a second, his gaze softened, like he could see right through me—through all the pretenses and straight to the ache underneath. Then, he casually looked away as if he hadn’t just laid me bare in a single sentence. He ran a hand over his hair, the tailored suit fitting him so well it was almost criminal.

“What’s a woman like you doing, all alone at her own party?” he asked, eyes gleaming with mischief.

“Oh, you noticed that, did you?” I laughed a little bitterly. “Congratulations. You’re officially the first person here to realize I exist.”

“Well, I have a knack for spotting hidden gems,” he replied, inching a bit closer. I could smell his cologne that lingered in the air—a woody musk smell that captivated me and had me on a choke hold. But it wasn’t just the cologne.

It was the way he looked at me—it made my pulse quicken, a dangerous thrill replacing the emptiness in my chest. He raised his glass, leaning in. I couldn’t help but wonder who he was behind the mask and why those eyes seemed like ones I had known all my life.

“Now tell me. I am curious. Why does the most beautiful woman in the room look like she’d rather be anywhere else?”

There it was again—something in his tone that cut right through my defenses. The way he called me beautiful—like it was a fact, not a compliment. And I, with all my stubborn dignity, felt a flush creep up my cheeks.

“Well,” I began, my voice a touch shaky, “for one, I have no idea who half these people are.”

He laughed, and it was such a genuine sound it startled me. “So, if I offered to whisk you away from all this—‘strangers’ for a moment, would you take me up on it?”

“Whisk me away?” I narrowed my eyes, skeptical but intrigued. “Is that a line you use on every woman at a masquerade?”

“No,” he said, his voice dropping to a soft, almost serious tone. “Just the one I can’t seem to look away from.”

For a second, I was speechless and lost in the way he looked at me like I was the only person in the room. It was unsettling and exhilarating all at once. His hand reached out, a silent invitation, and despite every logical part of my mind screaming not to trust him, I found my hand slipping into his.

He led me to a quieter part of the room, where the music faded to a hum. The world outside seemed to disappear. His hand was warm against mine, grounding me in a way I hadn’t felt in ages. His hands lingered on mine, his palms protective of mine in a way that I could almost swear screamed, “You are mine.”

“Tell me,” he murmured, his voice a gentle tease to my ears, sending a sensation through every nerve and neuron in my body, “Is it customary for brides-to-be to spend their engagements lurking in the shadows?”

“Depends on the bride, I suppose,” I responded, finding my voice and feeling the urge to pull away, but my body betrayed me as it settled in perfectly, right in his touch. “Besides, what do you know about engagements anyway?”

“Enough to know when someone’s heart isn’t in it,” he replied, watching me closely.

“Or is there another reason why you’re standing here with me instead of celebrating with your fiancé?”

My breath hitched at the question. The word “fiancé” felt like a foreign label, distant and cold.

“I could ask the same about you,” I shot back. “Why isn’t someone like you dancing with some mysterious masked woman?”

“Maybe because I was waiting for you,” he said with a glint in his eyes, that same gaze that seemed to see far too much. “It’s a shame, though. Such beauty deserves more than melancholy.”

“Oh?” I tilted my head, a smirk tugging at my lips. “And you think you’re just the remedy, do you?”

“Maybe,” he said with a shrug, his voice playful but earnest. “But let’s test the theory. What would it take to make you smile, truly smile?”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. I hadn’t thought about that in...well, I didn’t remember. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. This man—this stranger—was getting far too close to the truth, and it terrified me. But at the same time, I couldn’t look away.

“Is that why you’re here?” I asked, trying to deflect with a bit of sarcasm. “To rescue sad brides-to-be?”

“If she is worth rescuing,” he answered so sincerely it caught me off guard.

His gaze softened, and I felt his thumb brush gently over the back of my hand. The touch was so small, so delicate, but it sent shivers down my spine. Suddenly, I was

hyper-aware of the closeness between us, the warmth of his hand, the depth in his intense brown eyes looking down on me as his muscular frame towered over me.

“Listen,” I began, my voice barely a whisper. “Do you even know who I am?”

For a moment, his expression flickered, almost hesitant. Then he leaned in, his lips hovering near my ear.

“I don’t care,” he murmured, voice low and intimate. “I’m here for you, not for anyone else.”

The words melted over me, filling a void I hadn’t even known was there. I swallowed, realizing my hand was still in his, realizing I hadn’t even wanted to pull away.

“Do you always do this?” I asked, trying to shake off the intensity. “Charm women out of their own lives?”

“The ones who look like they’re desperate for an escape,” he quipped, the playfulness back in his eyes. “Besides, I am not trying to charm you. Our hearts are already intertwined with one another. Can’t you see it? This was meant to be.”

I laughed despite myself. The sound was surprising, even to me. “Well, you’re certainly...persistent.”

“Is that a problem?” he asked, his eyebrow quirking up.

“No,” I said, feeling a thrill run through me. “Just...unexpected.”

“Well, tell me. If you had one wish, what would that be?” he winced, eyes dropping to my lips for a fleeting second before returning to my gaze.

I closed my eyes, allowing my heart to take the lead for the first time in weeks, and the words that came out of my mouth defied every sense of logic I had known, “I would wish to disappear,”

“Say the word, and I will make it happen,”

I took in a deep breath, “Take me away.”

And in that moment, the weight of everything else—my father, the arrangement, the fact that this was my engagement party—faded. All that mattered was the way his hand felt in mine, the warmth of his gaze, and the reckless feeling building in my chest as he led me away.

I paused at the entrance as he pulled open the door of what seemed to be an apartment, and he gave me a nudging smile.

“Are you sure?” he asked, pulling me ever slightly to him, his hands resting on the small of my back.

I felt pretty light. It would seem the liquor I had earlier was kicking in.

“My head wants me to say no,” I confessed. He remained silent. “But my heart wants to know what you taste like,” I added, and his lips curved into a smile.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want to make love to you in the dark,” he spoke in a confidence I would kill for. He knew what he wanted, and right then, I knew he wanted me.

“But I want to see what you look like,” I muttered, my hands reaching for his mask, but his hands caught mine midway. I rolled my eyes, knowing I couldn’t fight the fire

burning inside me. It did not help that his words had turned me on more than I wanted to admit and had weakened my knees.

“Not now, Cherry,” I heard him say right before he spun me around, his mouth crashing on mine.

I wanted to take pride in the fact that I fought him off with everything in me, but I did not. I melted against him, his lips exploring mine in a way no one had ever, his hands gently caressing my face as we made our way inside the room. I paid no attention to my environment. It was dark, but he knew his way around. It was almost mechanical for him.

I let him kiss me, and I kissed him back with the same fervor.

“You taste like sin, sin mixed with apples,” I teased, and he tugged at me, caressing my hair and pulling it backward with one sweep of his fingers.

“You taste like cherries, my Cherry,” the thought of being his felt oddly comforting.

His eyes were dark in the room, but the brown in them still made their way to the light penetrating through mine, and his lips were red from kissing me. His hooded gaze remained on my face, and then he reached for my dress.

I heard it tear, slipping away to pool around my feet.

“You are everything I ever wanted. I waited for this moment all of my life,” he drawled, his eyes on my breasts. I wanted to ask what he meant, but his mouth touched the tips of my nipples, and I gasped out in pleasure. His wet tongue teased them a little bit more, seeming to enjoy the sound of me moaning to the raw pleasure he provided.

My throat clamped closed, and my chest heaved with effort.

“Who... who—you...?” I tried to ask, but my words failed me

I was unable to complete my statement before he flipped me over one shoulder, carrying me to what I made out in the darkness to be a bed.

He dropped me on my back, spreading my legs wider for his preview.

“I am going to take every bit of you now, Cherry,” he stated in that low tone, searing me with a glance before his head lowered, and a loud gasp escaped my throat.

I slapped a hand to my mouth to stop myself from screaming as the sensations of his tongue ricocheted up my spine and down my legs and settled into my toes, which curled in pleasure.

He rose to his feet after some minutes, reached for his pants, which he discarded to the far end of the room, and then he flipped me over on my knees, one hand coming to circle my throat.

“Your safe word is Cherry,” he whispered, but I couldn’t utter a single coherent word till we were done. After we climaxed, that was when I saw a dragon tattoo slightly below his elbow. I was intrigued because, below the tattoo, there was a calligraphed name, Jacqueline. Who was she to him? Did I just have sex with someone who had someone else in his life, someone so important he tattooed her name on him?

Now, I was standing at the altar, drowning in misery, caught between vows I never wanted to make and a life I didn’t choose. My head still pounded from last night’s mind-blowing sex, and I could almost smell the stranger’s cologne lingering in my memory. I’d left him at dawn, slipping back into the life I thought I could control.

“Mirella Gallo, do you take Don Carlos as your lawfully wedded husband?”

I blinked, jolted back to reality by the priest’s voice. He was looking at me expectantly, waiting for my answer. My gaze shifted to Don Carlos, standing there with his stiff posture and his gray hair combed back. He looked at me with such confidence, so sure that this was the answer to everyone’s problems—his, mine, my father’s. The last time I’d felt this trapped was probably in school detention.

Duty, I reminded myself, for my father, who was gripping his hat tightly in the front row as though it were the only thing holding him together. He was relying on me, counting on me. And Don Carlos? Well, he was here to save us from financial ruin, wasn’t he?

I took a deep breath, glanced one last time at my father’s pleading eyes, and finally nodded.

“Yes, I do.”

It came out weaker than I’d intended, barely a whisper, but I’d said it. There was a collective sigh from the guests, a relieved murmur in the pews. My father visibly relaxed, and I could almost feel the weight lifting from his shoulders.

The priest turned to Don Carlos, and I felt a strange sense of finality, of something that couldn’t be undone. I was now bound to a man who, only yesterday, I could barely look in the eye without a shiver of dread.

“Do you, Don Carlos, take Mirella Gallo as your lawfully wedded wife?”

I watched him, holding my breath as he looked down at me. Something in his expression shifted, and for a moment, he was no longer the polished, generous savior who had agreed to marry me. He looked amused. His lips curled, slowly forming a

grin that chilled me to my core. It wasn't a smile of affection or even respect. It was the kind of smile you might give to a defeated enemy.

“Why should I take this... whore as my wife?”

His words hit me like ice water. A gasp rippled through the guests, a wave of shock I could feel pressing against me. The priest froze, his eyes darting between us in utter confusion, and my father looked as if he'd just been stabbed.

But me? My heart... stopped.

What had he just called me?

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MIRELLA

Standing at the altar, I could almost feel the stranger's hands on my back, the memory of last night a taunting warmth I'd held onto, if only for a moment. Even now, the faint smell of his cologne clung to me, reminding me of the gentleness in his touch, of the way he looked at me, spoke to me, made love to me, and made me feel...alive.

"You're so heavenly."

I'd laughed at him. "Heavenly? Are you serious? We've barely known each other for an hour or two."

He'd looked at me with such intensity then, his brown eyes boring into mine, and said, "An hour or eternity, I know what I know. You are an angel sent from above," he paused and added, "An angel who needs me to rescue her,"

"Rescue me?" I raised an eyebrow, half-amused, half-intrigued. "I'm no damsel in distress."

"I never said you were," he replied, his gaze softening. "But even the strongest people sometimes need saving." He paused, his fingers trailing down my arm. "Sometimes, they just need someone to tell them there's another way."

His voice had been like a lifeline, yet I'd laughed it off, pretending not to care. "Well, Mr. 'Rescue Me,' what should I call you?"

He'd leaned in close, his mouth inches from mine, his breath warm on my skin. "Call me yours."

That line still sent a shiver through me, even standing here now, my eyes on the man who thought he owned me. A man old enough to be my father, who'd decided I was his.

"Why should I take this... whore as my wife?" Don Carlos spat.

The word hit me hard, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth, and for a moment, I couldn't breathe. My heart beat faster, the heat of shame creeping up my face as I saw heads turning with shocked glances cast in my direction. I steadied myself, forcing down the anger bubbling up inside me. "Don't you dare call me a whore."

My father rose from his seat, his face pale and pleading, "Please, friend, don't don't do this," but Don Carlos's eyes were locked on me with that cold, smug expression I'd come to know too well.

"Then tell me, Mirella," he smirked, his voice dripping with venom, "What else should we call a woman who sneaks off with a masked stranger at her own engagement party to go get fucked by him."

The murmurs grew louder with the judgment in their whispers. And then, to my horror, I heard a click. I looked up at the screen where our wedding hymns were meant to be displayed. My stomach turned as the image flickered and changed, the serene background replaced by a grainy video taken from a dark corner, clearly shot with a phone. I blinked in disbelief, feeling the world around me tilt.

On the screen, it was me. Me and him , the stranger. I could see us standing by the door of the room last night, him cupping my face, his mask askew, my hand resting on his chest as we hesitated, inches apart. He'd leaned in, and then we kissed. A kiss

that had felt so forbidden and so right, I couldn't help but melt into it.

I swallowed hard, trying to keep my voice steady, but all I could manage was a whisper. "You... you had me followed?"

Don Carlos looked back at me, unphased and ruthless, as if he hadn't just set fire to my dignity in front of everyone. "Of course. One of my men saw you leaving with him, thinking you'd vanished. So, I asked him to investigate and look what he found." He gestured to the screen as if he were showing off some prized possession.

The congregation stared, eyes darting from me to Don Carlos and then to the video where the stranger and I had slipped into the room, the door clicking shut behind us. I wanted to scream, to run, to disappear.

Don Carlos leaned in, his voice low and dripping with malice. "Tell me, Mirella. Who was he? Who's the man you snuck off with?" He tilted his head, a cruel smile creeping onto his face as he continued, "You have one minute to answer."

I looked to my father, hoping for some kind of help, some sort of escape, but he just stood there, frozen in shock, as if someone had pulled the ground out from beneath his feet. Maybe he hadn't known, my face flaming with my anger.

Don Carlos's hand slipped into his coat pocket, and a glint of metal caught my eye. He pulled out a gun, casually pointing it toward my father as if this was nothing more than an after-dinner activity.

The church gasped, some people rising from their seats, others frozen in place. I felt my pulse hammering in my ears, louder than the murmurs echoing through the room.

Don Carlos's tone was almost bored. "I'll give you until the count of five, Mirella. Either you tell me who the man was, or I pull this trigger." He looked at me with a

chilling calmness, the kind that only someone completely void of empathy could manage. “One.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. My mind raced, but all I could think of was the stranger, the way he’d looked at me with those warm, brown eyes, the way he’d asked me to stay, to run away with him.

“Two.”

I closed my eyes, forcing myself to breathe. Think, Mirella. Think! But all I could feel was the cold metal in Don Carlos’s hand, aimed directly at my father’s heart.

“Three.”

Every cell in my body screamed at me to run, to fight back, to do something, but I was rooted in place, paralyzed by the situation I had fucked my way into. My father was still standing, his eyes wide with terror, and I could see his lips moving, whispering something—maybe a prayer, maybe an apology. But what good would it do? Don Carlos was not a man of mercy.

“Four.”

My eyes locked onto Don Carlos, the twisted satisfaction in his gaze, the glint of triumph as he relished every second of my silence. He knew he had me trapped. He knew there was nothing I could do, no words I could say, no secret I could reveal that would undo the nightmare unraveling before me.

“Five...”

I heard the shot before I could utter a word.

It was like the entire world held its breath, and then chaos exploded around me. I heard gasps and screams, and suddenly, there he was, the stranger, his face hidden by that same mask, striding down the aisle with a gun aimed straight at Don Carlos. My stomach flipped as the realization hit me: he was here. He'd come back for me.

Don Carlos barely had time to react before the gunshot echoed, sharp and loud, and the bullet struck him right in the chest. Don Carlos stumbled, his hand reaching out in shock before he crumpled to the floor. And in that moment, all I could think of was that look in his eyes—cold and ruthless.

The stranger didn't hesitate. He turned to me and extended his hand, and my heart skipped. But it wasn't his eyes or the mask that made me reach out. It was the tattoo, a dragon coiled just below his elbow. A tattoo I'd run my fingers over just last night. It was really him. He was here to rescue me.

"Come with me," he said, his voice low and commanding, pulling me out of my daze. His grip was warm and familiar, and without thinking, I took his hand.

Then all hell broke loose.

Don Carlos's men, his so-called loyal guards, surged forward, shouting orders and drawing their guns. Shots fired, ricocheting off the walls. My heart was pounding, and I could hardly think straight. I'd never felt this level of fear, and yet, there was something freeing in the stranger's hand, pulling me through the gunshots.

"Over here!" He yanked me behind a pillar, shielding me as bullets zipped past, hitting chairs and chipping walls. I was breathless, my chest heaving. He leaned in close, and I could see the intensity in his eyes, even through the mask. "We're getting out of here."

I looked up, almost dizzy with adrenaline, barely able to form words. "But—my

father. I can't leave without him."

The stranger's expression softened, but only for a second. He scanned the room, assessing the danger, then pulled me closer. "There's no time. He'd want you safe. We have to go."

I shook my head, fighting back the tears. "No. I can't just leave him to die here."

More gunshots. This time, one of them hit the wall inches from us, and instinctively, he pulled me into his chest, his arms wrapping protectively around me. It felt like a shelter I didn't know I needed. A shiver ran through me, and when I looked up, he was watching me intently.

"I didn't come all this way to lose you," he whispered.

For one brief moment, the room seemed to fall away. There was only his voice.

"Fine," I managed, my voice barely a whisper, but before I could say anything more, a blast echoed, and the stranger grunted. He clutched his shoulder, blood seeping through his fingers. He swayed slightly, and my heart dropped.

"No, no! You're hurt," my voice broke. I tried to steady him, but he shook his head, pushing me back.

"Go, Mirella. Run. Get out of this city, and don't look back."

"I can't... I can't just leave you."

"You have to," he breathed, struggling to stay on his feet, pain etched across his face. He forced a smile, almost tender, and for one terrifying moment, I thought he was going to fall. "I'll find you. I promise."

“But... you’re hurt. I don’t even know your name.”

A small chuckle escaped him, pained but full of warmth. “Names are overrated. Now, go. Live. For both of us.”

He lifted his hand, gently brushing a stray tear from my cheek. And then another shot rang out, so close I flinched, but I didn’t dare turn back to see where it had landed in his body. He gave me one last, steady look, then shoved me towards the door, his voice low and rough.

“Run, Mirella. Now.”

I hesitated for one heartbeat, and, in that moment, everything blurred together—the screams, the sound of my own pulse pounding in my ears, the stranger’s pained gaze, begging me to go before he shut the door behind me, then followed by the blast of gunshots. I veered to my heels, my legs carrying me forward, out of the church and into the city streets. I could hardly breathe as I ran through the city.

The streets felt foreign, cold, and distant. My feet were blistered, my lungs burned, and still, I couldn’t shake the image of him standing there, bleeding, ready to face the wrath of Don Carlos’s men alone, all for me.

I ran until my legs ached and my breath came in shallow gasps. The stranger’s last words echoed in my mind, haunting me: “Live. For both of us.” But how could I, knowing I’d left him behind to die?

I found refuge in a narrow alleyway, pressing myself against the wall as if it could hide me from the shame and guilt clawing at my heart.

The wind felt colder now, biting into my skin. But all I could do was hold onto that one last memory—the warmth of his hand in mine and his face so close as if he’d

known me forever. A stranger, yet somehow, not.

Two painful and dreadful months passed, and I stayed low, drifting from town to town, a shadow of the person I once was. I told myself I was surviving for him and for the father I'd left behind. But every night, his face haunted me, taunting me with what could've been. And then, one day, everything changed.

I sat alone in a small cottage when reality hit me in one quiet, heart-stopping moment. My hands shook as I held the test strip before me.

Pregnant.

I was pregnant with his child, the stranger, the man I barely knew and yet could never forget. Sorrow and joy welled up inside me. I didn't know where one emotion ended and the other began. I pressed my hand against my stomach, my heart pounding as I thought of him, that night, of his words, when he called me Cherry, the taste of him.

He was heavenly.

"Oh, little one," I muttered, my voice breaking. "You're all I have left of him."

A tear slipped down my cheek, but I didn't wipe it away. There was a strange strength in the knowledge that part of him lived on and that our brief love had created something beautiful. The life growing inside me was proof of him—proof he had loved me briefly but passionately.

But that love, that brief, unforgettable love, was enough to push me through.

I pressed both hands against my belly, feeling the faint imaginary heartbeat of life

within me, and swore aloud.

“I will avenge your father and grandfather by any means necessary.”

Whether in life or in death, I would make them pay.

CHAPTER THREE

MIRELLA

“The city is too quiet,” I muttered to myself, loathing the way my voice echoed through the walls.

It’s been five good years, and I was still not used to the eerie silence the city brought. As a girl who grew up in New York and was used to the city being vibrant and noisy, I always looked forward to cursing and swearing as a form of distraction. In this city, where a pin drop could be heard from a mile away, a hundred thoughts turned over in my mind—loud, scary, and uncertain thoughts. But there was one clear constant—my son, Alex. Sweet Alex, with his father’s quiet brown eyes and my stubborn chin. That boy was my life. My only link to a future I once thought was gone.

He was in the next room, probably asleep by now, with his little stuffed rabbit tucked in beside him. I glanced at the door, feeling that familiar ache tug at my chest. How did I get so lucky with him? I would die for him; no, I’d do worse. I’d live for him every single day, making sure no harm ever touched him.

Alex made me see the world differently. Every laugh, every wobbly step, and even his messy drawings meant everything to me. He didn’t understand it yet, but he was the reason I pushed so hard, why I built this new life. All this was for him—and maybe, a little bit for the man who gave him to me. I couldn’t forget that man. I couldn’t shake his image hidden behind that mask.

I'd searched endlessly for him to at least know who he was, pouring over everything I could find on Don Carlos's associates, but nothing came up. I didn't even have a name, only the memory of a tattoo just below his elbow and the way he'd looked at me for that single moment. He was a ghost, a shadow, and maybe he had wanted it that way. But that didn't stop me. I wanted to know who he was. I wanted to look him in the eyes and...what? Thank him? Accuse him? I wasn't sure. Just to know, that's all. But I'd turned up empty, again and again. Then, why was I looking for a dead man?

Don Carlos had certainly survived, that much I knew. I'd seen him plastered across tabloids, smiling for cameras as if he were a model citizen. Everyone believed his story—that he was just a businessman, a club owner. Meanwhile, his real empire of weapons, drugs, and who knew what else was left untouched, hidden in the shadows. Rumor had it he even dabbled in human trafficking, though no one could prove it. He was like vapor, never leaving enough behind to be traced.

It made me sick.

But I knew, right then and there, that I had to outplay him. I couldn't face him alone. No, I had to be untouchable first. That's how Raven came to be. I'd built her from the ground up, right here in the city, cloaked in shadows. Mirella Gallo had disappeared the day I left, leaving only Raven in her place. No one knew they were the same person, just Dahlia, my brilliant assistant, and Enzo, my right hand. They didn't know everything but they knew enough to trust me, and that was all I needed.

I glanced up as Enzo came through the door, his usual serious face betraying a hint of something else. Excitement, maybe?

“You've got that look again, Enzo. Tell me, what do you know?”

He crossed his arms, his expression as unreadable as ever. “This time, it's big.”

I arched an eyebrow, not sure if I believed him. Enzo's idea of 'big news' usually meant someone went bankrupt or some associate made a shady deal. But I motioned for him to go on.

"Rumor has it..." He paused, and I could feel my pulse quicken.

"Yes?"

"Rumor has it your father's alive."

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My fists clenched, my nails digging into my palms. "Leverage for what?"

"Everything, as far as I can tell. Your father's wealth, his connections. Don Carlos's men whisper that he's milking your father's name for every last drop."

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that much.

“How sure are you, Enzo?”

“Eighty percent.”

I smirked at his certainty. “Eighty percent, huh?”

“Enough for me to bet on it,” he added, his face unwavering. “Which is why I brought this to you now. If you want to move forward, I’m ready.”

I met his gaze, considering it. Enzo had been with me for years and had proven his loyalty more times than I could count. If he was confident, I trusted him.

“And what if it’s a trap?” I asked.

“Then, we spring it. Besides, I don’t see you backing out of this now.”

He wasn’t wrong. I didn’t come this far to stop just because there was a risk. I’d built Raven’s empire from nothing. I had the means, the power, and the influence now. I could do this. I had managed to stay anonymous all these years as Raven, only dealing in the shadow. Enzo was at the forefront always. He had this ruthless charm to his allure that made him lovable and scary at the same time. People feared him, which was perfect. To the world, Raven was just a mythical tale. She wasn’t real. Even though I had shown myself on one or two occasions in an all-black clothing disguise, I was still invisible. Just like that day at the engagement party, just before he saw me and whisked me away.

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“Someone has to keep you in check.”

We shared a quick, rare laugh—a release from the heaviness that hung in the air. But then, the reality settled in again, hard and cold. This wasn’t just some business venture or a power play. This was my family—my father. And the fact that Don Carlos was holding him, using him for his own gain, filled me with a quiet fury.

“Gather everything we need,” I ordered. “Money, resources, locations. I want to be prepared for every possibility.”

Enzo gave a curt nod. “Understood. Anything else?”

“Yes.” I looked him straight in the eye. “No one is to know about this—not Dahlia, not Alex. Not until I know it’s safe.”

“Of course.”

As Enzo left, I sat back down, letting out a slow breath. If my father was alive, that changed everything. But it also meant I had more at stake than ever before. Don Carlos wasn’t just some rival; he was a threat to everything I held dear.

And as I looked out the window, the city lights twinkling in the distance, one thought anchored me. I would get back everything Don Carlos had taken, every last cent and drop of power. My father, my family’s wealth—all of it. I’d infiltrate Don Carlos’s empire if that’s what it took.

For Alex, for my father, for every promise I had yet to keep.

Stepping off the plane, the noise of New York City greeted me like an old friend. The sound of honking cars and the chatter of busy streets—something about it all made me feel grounded and alive. I had spent too long hidden away, building my empire in silence, always watching but never seen. But now? Now, it was time to show the world that Mirella Gallo was back, stronger than ever.

I glanced at Enzo, who gave me a knowing look. “The gala starts in an hour. Perfect timing,” he smirked. “Should I prepare a team?”

I grinned, already imagining the scene. “Oh, yes. Make sure I’m flawless. If I’m coming out of the shadows, I want the whole city to know.”

An hour later, I was in front of a mirror, admiring the transformation. My gown hugged every curve—a rich midnight blue with a shimmer that seemed to dance under the lights. The neckline sunk daringly, and the fabric flowed down to the floor like liquid. My hair was swept back, sleek and elegant, leaving nothing to distract from the defiant fire in my eyes.

The makeup artists fussed over the last details—dark lipstick, a touch of silver on the eyelids, and a smoky gaze that dared anyone to look away. This wasn’t just a dress or makeup; it was armor, and every inch of it was meant to turn heads and make them whisper.

Tonight, the queen was back.

The gala was in full swing by the time I arrived. I felt every gaze on me as I stepped inside. Conversations paused, and glasses halted mid-air. All eyes were on me. It was a delicious kind of power. I watched them as they watched me, enjoying the shock and murmurs.

I made my way through the crowd. I could feel them parting like water. And then, at the far end of the room, I saw him. Don Carlos himself was standing tall in his expensive suit, holding a glass of something dark. His expression shifted from surprise to a twisted smirk as he took in the sight of me.

I could practically hear his thoughts. Well, well. Look who finally crawled out of her hiding place.

Without a word, he motioned for me to come closer. I approached him, my steps slow and deliberate. He didn't deserve the satisfaction of seeing me rush.

"So," he sneered, his voice laced with a mocking edge, "My little runaway bride finally decided to return."

I met his gaze without flinching. "I'm here to do business, Don Carlos. There's no need for trouble."

He laughed, the sound cutting through the room. "Business? What do you know about business, Mirella?" His tone was so patronizing that I almost rolled my eyes right then and there. Instead, I kept my expression calm and unruffled.

"I know enough," I replied coolly, keeping my voice steady. "I'm not here to dredge up the past or to settle old scores."

Carlos chuckled, sipping his drink with exaggerated ease. "Bold of you to show your face, though. After all, you did run off with some man on our wedding day."

“Was that supposed to be an insult?” I raised an eyebrow. “I was young, Don Carlos. Na?ve. I thought true love could win and that life was fair.”

He smirked. “And now? Has life taught you anything useful?”

I looked away, pretending a bitterness I didn’t feel. “It taught me that love is trash. A fairy tale meant to make fools of us all. Now, I’m here for only one thing—what my father left for me.”

A flicker of surprise crossed his face, quickly replaced by suspicion. He leaned closer, his voice low. “And why should I believe that’s all you’re after?”

I met his eyes, unwavering. “Because I have nothing else left, Don Carlos. You took my family. All I want is what’s mine. I don’t need or want your pity. Or your lies.”

He looked at me for a long, tense moment before laughing again. “The audacity. Showing up here like you’re some grieving daughter after running off like you did. You really think I’d hand over anything without a price?”

I forced myself to stay calm, my voice a carefully crafted whisper of indifference. “Name it.”

Carlos leaned back, smug as ever. “It’s simple. You marry me.”

The words hit me like ice water, but I let only the barest hint of disgust flash in my eyes. Marry him? It was almost funny, really. The idea was repulsive, but it was exactly what I’d hoped he’d propose. Marriage would put me right where I needed to be. In his home. In his business. And, eventually, in control.

“Marry you?” I scoffed, pretending to mull it over. “Don Carlos, be reasonable. That would be a last resort.”

“Resort or not, that’s the price,” he replied smoothly, his expression darkening. “Do you really think you’re in a position to negotiate?”

“I suppose not,” I murmured, biting my lip in feigned reluctance. “I just... I just thought maybe there was some other way.”

He laughed, clearly enjoying himself. “The only way you’re getting anything is by tying yourself to me. Permanently.”

I sighed, allowing myself to appear weary and defeated. “Fine. But don’t think for a second this will be easy for me.”

Carlos’s smirk widened, satisfied. “Now, that’s the Mirella I remember. Always knew you’d come crawling back. A bold move, coming here and showing your face. But desperate times call for desperate measures, I suppose.”

“Desperate measures, indeed,” I echoed, keeping my tone low and bitter. “But if it means reclaiming what my father left behind, I’ll play the part. Just don’t expect me to enjoy it.”

His laugh grated against my nerves. He stepped closer, his voice suddenly a whisper. “Welcome to the family. Again.”

As he turned, Don Carlos motioned to a figure across the room. “You remember my son, don’t you?” His voice dripped with amusement. “Sergio.”

My heart skipped a beat. Sergio? I hadn’t thought of him in years, not since we were kids, running through gardens, daring each other to climb trees and sneak into forbidden rooms. I could still remember the way his laughter sounded, bright and mischievous. And that warm, steady gaze that always seemed to understand more than I ever said.

But that was years ago. What would he be like now?

Then, he appeared, stepping into view, and I felt the room tilt. He was striking. He towered over most people, easily six foot two, with a muscular build that suggested he hadn't spent his life just lounging in luxury. His hair was dark, cropped short, and his face bore the shadows of light stubble. But it was his eyes that caught me. They were dark brown, intense, and sharp like he was sizing me up, piecing me together before I could say a word.

Carlos's voice broke through my thoughts. "Mirella, meet my son, Sergio. I'm sure you remember him from those little childhood days."

The memory came rushing back—the crush I'd harbored, the endless summers of childhood games. And now, here he was, no longer the boy I remembered, but a man.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm

MIRELLA

“The city is too quiet,” I muttered to myself, loathing the way my voice echoed through the walls.

It’s been five good years, and I was still not used to the eerie silence the city brought. As a girl who grew up in New York and was used to the city being vibrant and noisy, I always looked forward to cursing and swearing as a form of distraction. In this city, where a pin drop could be heard from a mile away, a hundred thoughts turned over in my mind—loud, scary, and uncertain thoughts. But there was one clear constant—my son, Alex. Sweet Alex, with his father’s quiet brown eyes and my stubborn chin. That boy was my life. My only link to a future I once thought was gone.

He was in the next room, probably asleep by now, with his little stuffed rabbit tucked in beside him. I glanced at the door, feeling that familiar ache tug at my chest. How did I get so lucky with him? I would die for him; no, I’d do worse. I’d live for him every single day, making sure no harm ever touched him.

Alex made me see the world differently. Every laugh, every wobbly step, and even his messy drawings meant everything to me. He didn’t understand it yet, but he was the reason I pushed so hard, why I built this new life. All this was for him—and maybe, a little bit for the man who gave him to me. I couldn’t forget that man. I couldn’t shake his image hidden behind that mask.

I’d searched endlessly for him to at least know who he was, pouring over everything I could find on Don Carlos’s associates, but nothing came up. I didn’t even have a name, only the memory of a tattoo just below his elbow and the way he’d looked at

me for that single moment. He was a ghost, a shadow, and maybe he had wanted it that way. But that didn't stop me. I wanted to know who he was. I wanted to look him in the eyes and...what? Thank him? Accuse him? I wasn't sure. Just to know, that's all. But I'd turned up empty, again and again. Then, why was I looking for a dead man?

Don Carlos had certainly survived, that much I knew. I'd seen him plastered across tabloids, smiling for cameras as if he were a model citizen. Everyone believed his story—that he was just a businessman, a club owner. Meanwhile, his real empire of weapons, drugs, and who knew what else was left untouched, hidden in the shadows. Rumor had it he even dabbled in human trafficking, though no one could prove it. He was like vapor, never leaving enough behind to be traced.

It made me sick.

But I knew, right then and there, that I had to outplay him. I couldn't face him alone. No, I had to be untouchable first. That's how Raven came to be. I'd built her from the ground up, right here in the city, cloaked in shadows. Mirella Gallo had disappeared the day I left, leaving only Raven in her place. No one knew they were the same person, just Dahlia, my brilliant assistant, and Enzo, my right hand. They didn't know everything but they knew enough to trust me, and that was all I needed.

I glanced up as Enzo came through the door, his usual serious face betraying a hint of something else. Excitement, maybe?

“You've got that look again, Enzo. Tell me, what do you know?”

He crossed his arms, his expression as unreadable as ever. “This time, it's big.”

I arched an eyebrow, not sure if I believed him. Enzo's idea of 'big news' usually meant someone went bankrupt or some associate made a shady deal. But I motioned

for him to go on.

“Rumor has it...” He paused, and I could feel my pulse quicken.

“Yes?”

“Rumor has it your father’s alive.”

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SERGIO

The moment she walked in, everything stopped. It was as if the entire room faded to a whisper. Every guest and every sound was drowned out by the sight of her. Mirella. She'd grown into every bit of the beauty I used to glimpse beneath her shyness and those thick, dark lashes. In that instant, I felt seventeen again, sneaking glances at the girl with braces and acne who somehow always managed to glow despite it all. Now, that glow had turned into something magnetic and drew every eye in the room, especially mine.

I couldn't take my gaze off her. She looked like she owned the place, with that delicate lift of her chin and her shoulders squared in that soft, smooth gown. It was a dress made for movement, but she wore it like armor, and she was impossible to miss. She'd spent so long believing she was invisible, hidden beneath her father's shadow, beneath those insecurities she used to carry so heavily. But that was never true, not to me. She was always a hidden gem. Tonight, though, she wasn't hiding from anyone. I wasn't even sure she could if she tried.

A hidden gem. That's what she'd always been, though she'd never believed it. Mirella had thought herself invisible, someone who could fade into the crowd. But the truth? She never could. She'd always been the brightest thing in the room, and now, it was more than ever.

When my father introduced us, I watched her hesitate before she extended her hand, her eyes searching mine. Did she know? Did she remember?

I adjusted my sleeves, partly to buy myself a second and partly to ground myself. The

military had taught me a lot of things, but it hadn't prepared me for the dizzying pull of meeting her like this—Mirella, right in front of me after all these years. I reached for her hand, and when our fingers touched, I felt an ache, sharp and undeniable. “Nice to meet you once again, Mirella.”

I'd rehearsed those words a hundred times since I came back from deployment. I had practiced how I might act if I ever saw her again. Yet nothing could have prepared me for the reality of it. The feel of her hand in mine was warm and so familiar, especially without the mask.

The last time we had seen each other, I had a mask on. I was the one hiding.

She didn't know, of course. She had no idea I was the man behind the mask—the one from the night she ran, the one who tried to save her. She couldn't know. It was a secret I was prepared to take to my grave.

My father's voice broke the moment, pulling me back to the present. Don Carlos' son. A title I'd grown to hate, one I couldn't strip off no matter how far I ran. “A son's duty to his father,” he'd say. And I'd wanted to be a good son once. I wanted to be what he wanted, even if it meant losing parts of myself. But he'd broken that faith a long time ago. It started with my mother and with the cold detachment he used to keep me in line after she was gone. He claimed it was to make me a man. He said it was a lesson and a path to control. But I saw the truth—he only wanted control over me.

I left because of that. The military was my escape and a way to prove to myself that I didn't need him and I could build something of my own. I thought it would make me strong enough to stand up to him. But when I came back, he'd pulled me right back into his orbit, claiming I'd been gone long enough. All the while, I knew he'd never stop. He was too used to power and ruling every move I made.

So, here I was, back in his world, and now Mirella was back too. But this was different. She wasn't here for him. That much was obvious. She was here for herself. And I saw that resolve in her eyes, something fierce and fiery.

My father laughed as though the sight of us together was some personal victory for him. He looked at her with the same cold, evaluating glint he'd used on me so many times. "Ah, Mirella, my son may be bold, but I see you haven't lost your edge either. How very interesting."

I stiffened, resisting the urge to interrupt him. Every word he spoke felt like a trap.

I caught her glancing my way—maybe to see if I would defend her. But I didn't want to give my father the satisfaction of knowing he was getting under my skin. He turned to me, gesturing at Mirella with a smug, knowing smirk. "You remember our dear Mirella, don't you? Though she's come a long way since those little childhood days." His words carried a condescending undertone as if she were still the girl from years ago, the one he thought he could control.

"Yes, Father," I answered, giving her a look of my own. The same words I'd used to placate him for years. But this time, I meant them differently. Mirella was not just any girl, and he had no clue who she was. "She's unforgettable."

A glimpse of surprise crossed her face, but she masked it quickly, looking back at him with that same calm expression she'd had when she walked in.

My father's laugh grated against me, a sound that once held power but now only felt hollow. I could see it—the way she bristled at him. That old spark of rebellion she used to have in her eyes was back and fiercer than before. He was testing her, gauging how far he could push, but she wasn't the girl who'd let him. I knew that much, and I could only guess what she was planning.

For so long, I'd tried to keep myself guarded. I tried to avoid feeling the way I once had about her. But seeing her facing my father with that steady strength reminded me of why I'd loved her and why I still did, no matter how hard I'd tried to forget.

He kept talking and making mocking comments about her absence and her "running off like a naive girl." It was a statement aimed at humiliating her and reminding her of who he thought she was.

She didn't flinch, but her voice was soft when she spoke, and I could tell there was a hidden edge beneath her words. "Perhaps I was naive then. Perhaps I believed that love was enough." She glanced briefly at me, a glance so quick I almost missed it. "But life teaches you things. It taught me that some people are best left in the past."

I wanted to ask her, right then, about the years between us, about the one night when I wore a mask and saw her again. But the time wasn't right.

"Your boldness amuses me, Mirella," my father interrupted, laughing as though she were here merely to entertain him. He took a step closer to her, studying her with that dark, calculating gaze. "Still, with all that boldness, you accepted my condition. Not so bold, I guess?"

She lifted her chin, trying to hide the unease in her gaze. But I saw it there, a glimpse of what might have been fear.

"What condition?"

And I braced myself, knowing what he'd say next, knowing it would change everything.

"Son, I forgot to mention, Mirella has agreed to marry me," he declared, his words cold and decisive.

I watched the shock ripple through me. And yet, as much as it hurt to think of her being tied to him, part of me knew there was more. After everything she sacrificed, this couldn't be it. Her eyes met mine, and I wish I could read her thoughts and let her in on mine.

I wish I could tell her all about that night.

The night Mirella slipped away was still etched in my mind, sharp and alive. The memory of her, wrapped in silk sheets, her laughter, hushed but sincere, had kept me up for months. And that look in her eyes—the way she held onto some secret, some sense of duty, even when I begged her to leave with me—cut deeper than any bullet I had taken for her.

“Come with me,” I had told her, my voice barely a whisper. My heart pounded against my ribs, the words falling out fast as if I could somehow bind her to me before reality set in. “We can just leave and go somewhere no one will find us.”

Her eyes softened with a glimmer of pain that almost made me believe she'd say yes, but instead, her lips curved into that sad, stubborn smile I'd always known.

“I can't,” she said finally. “I owe my family this. I have to stay.”

That was Mirella—loyal to a fault. I knew the sense of duty she carried was a burden, yet it was also what made her—her. It was what held her back then, and somehow, it brought her back tonight, a few years older and wiser and even more stunning than I remembered.

When she entered the gala, it was as if the entire room stopped to look at her. I was no different, but my eyes saw things no one else would catch.

But what Mirella didn't know was that I hadn't forgotten a single thing. Every late-night scroll through the internet, every time I searched for some clue to her life now, every memory—the braces, the acne, her transformation into a breathtaking woman—all of it, vivid and present in my mind. I hadn't forgotten the memory of that night and how she kissed me. Or how I made love to her in the dark, caressing every inch and curve of her body, mastering and taking mental pictures of her features.

That night changed my life. I came home because I was informed of my dad's engagement, only to discover she was being forced to marry my father—a man I despised with every bone in my body.

Don Carlos was showing her off proudly. His arm was around her like some prize he'd won, and bile rose in my throat. But Mirella's gaze drifted my way, and for a moment, the room faded, and it was just us, just like old times.

Today, I was back in that cycle. He was doing the same thing. As soon as my father turned his attention elsewhere, I slipped in beside her, and I could see the spark of recognition in her gaze, something deeper than just a childhood memory.

“Mind if I whisk you away for a moment,” I asked, and she nodded curtly. She was silent. She barely said a word till we were out of sight.

We slipped outside, away from the stifling heat of the crowd, into the cool night air. Mirella let out a soft sigh, wrapping her arms around herself. She looked up at me with those eyes that had haunted my dreams for years.

“You look different,” she murmured, studying me with a curiosity I couldn't quite place.

I leaned against the balcony railing, a smirk forming. “Different good or different

bad?”

“Different... in a good way,” she admitted, glancing down, her fingers fidgeting slightly. “Though I can’t shake the feeling I’ve seen those eyes somewhere else recently.”

My heart skipped a beat, but I played it cool, letting a playful grin slip out. “Guess you’d know them. We did grow up together, after all.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s more than that. A few years ago, I... I met someone with your eyes.” Her voice trailed off, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her lips as if she were holding onto some precious memory.

I chuckled, shrugging. “Trust me, I’d remember if we’d met before tonight.” I leaned in closer, lowering my voice. “Though, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t wish we had.”

Her cheeks flushed deeper, a flicker of nervous laughter escaping. “Then, I must be mistaken. Sorry, I was just... I ... just wish it was him,”

I gave a small laugh, feigning casualness, though every inch of me wanted to pull her close and tell her everything. But instead, I leaned back and caught her gaze. “When it comes to the eyes, there’s no confusion,” I said softly.

Her laugh was soft, embarrassed, but genuine. I found myself clinging to the sound, wanting more of it and savoring every note. She looked out into the night sky, her expression growing distant and thoughtful.

“What about you, Sergio?” Her voice was barely a murmur now, the kind you’d have to lean in close to hear. “What brought you back? It’s been years.”

I shrugged, slipping my hands into my pockets. “The military, actually. I spent close

to ten years serving in the army. I came back recently—just in time for my father’s latest ‘engagement.’”

Her expression shifted, a mixture of surprise and relief. “The military? I didn’t know. I mean, I hadn’t heard.”

A bitter smile crept up. “I wasn’t exactly sending postcards.” I caught her gaze and the way her brow softened. It was almost as if she understood the weight I carried. “My father, though... well, he made sure I’d come back, and well, all in good cause. He got engaged today again,”

She didn’t respond right away, but the look in her eyes told me she understood far more than I’d said. I forced a grin, lightening the mood, reaching for something to say, anything to keep the moment from slipping away.

“What about you, Mirella?” I asked, leaning closer. “My father got you under some kind of spell now, or are you now like elite cocktails?”

Her laugh, quick and genuine, filled the air. “More like a duty I can’t seem to shake,” she admitted, glancing away. “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated,” I echoed, nodding. “Seems to be the theme tonight.”

We both fell silent, a tension lingering in the air, something both of us were too proud—or too afraid—to say. I could feel her heartbeat, steady and unyielding, almost as if it was in sync with mine.

Then, I spotted my father out of the corner of my eye, heading toward us, his eyes scanning the room. Before I could say anything, he was beside us, his hand reaching out to take Mirella’s arm.

“Ah, Mirella,” Carlos beamed, his gaze sliding to me, his smile never quite reaching his eyes. “I see you have a lot to catch up with Sergio. Good. But come now, my dear. I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

I stepped back, feeling the pull of reality and the sting of seeing her in his grasp. For a split second, she looked back at me, her expression unreadable.

Before she turned away, I caught her gaze and held it, hoping she understood the promise in my eyes, the one I couldn’t speak aloud. Just wait. Just wait a little longer.

My father led her back into the crowd, his arm possessive around her, oblivious to the storm he was feeding in me.

I wasn’t going to let him have her, not this time. I don’t mind putting another bullet in him, and this time, I would aim higher.

I will protect you, Mirella.

SERGIO

I couldn't tear my eyes away from her. Mirella, back under the thumb of my father, the very man I'd tried to rescue her from once. She was a mystery, wrapped in elegance and strength, standing by his side as if nothing had ever happened. Why did she come back? Why now, and for what? I could feel the anger simmering beneath my calm facade, but the confusion hit just as hard.

It wasn't long before I heard Ryan's familiar voice behind me, giving me that exasperated sigh he always had when he thought I was doing something foolish. Ryan had been my battle buddy through two tours and patched me up more times than I'd like to admit. Now, he was right there beside me in this business hell we called "work." His voice had that casual, knowing tone I'd come to rely on.

"So, is that her?" He raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms, watching me with that same look he gave me when I did something stupid in the field.

I didn't need to ask what he meant. "Yeah," I muttered, a dry bitterness lacing my words. "That's the girl."

He let out a low whistle. "The one you literally took a bullet for?"

A humorless chuckle escaped me. "The very one."

Ryan looked over at her, his face turning serious. "You really sure you want to go down that road again? Last time, it didn't exactly turn out so great."

“I know,” I said, running a hand through my hair, still not tearing my gaze away from her. “But something’s different now. I feel it. There’s more going on here than meets the eye.”

Ryan shook his head, giving me that look he reserved for lost causes. “Come on, Sergio. You already tried to save her, and look where she ended up—right back with him. She made her choice.”

I clenched my jaw, refusing to accept that so easily. “Maybe she did. But it doesn’t feel right, Ryan. You know, sometimes people don’t get a choice. Not when it comes to my father.”

He sighed, glancing over at her. “Sergio, listen to me. You can’t keep trying to fight his battles for everyone. Mirella’s smart—she knows who your father is and what he’s capable of. She’s not some damsel in distress.”

“Maybe not,” I admitted, feeling the weight of the past pressing down on me. “But if there’s even a chance that he’s got something on her or that she’s here against her will. I can’t just stand by and let him hurt her.”

Ryan looked at me long and hard, and then he glanced away with a resigned shake of his head. “You’re still haunted by her, aren’t you? Or maybe it’s something else.”

There was silence between us for a moment, the kind that only Ryan could break. “Look, Sergio, I get it. You can’t seem to let this go. But you’ve got a hell of a lot more going on than Mirella’s tragic love story.”

Ryan was right. This wasn’t only about Mirella. I took a deep breath, my eyes drifting to the tattoo on my arm. One word. Jacqueline . My mother’s name.

I knew what he meant. I could never forget her—my father had made sure of that.

Jacqueline had been beautiful, with a spirit no one could contain, certainly not a monster like my father. He had turned that love to ashes, and I wore her name on my skin as a reminder of everything I'd lost and everything I'd come to hate about him.

"You know why I can't let this go, Ryan," I said, my voice low. "I won't let my father destroy another woman the way he destroyed her."

Ryan's expression softened, a hint of sympathy flickering across his face. "Sergio..."

My mind drifted back to memories I had tried so hard to bury. I'd been a kid back then, not even old enough to understand fully, but old enough to remember. My mother, Jacqueline, had been full of life, kindness, and laughter. She was everything good in my world, and my father had snuffed her out as easily as if he'd blown out a candle.

Ryan watched me quietly like he always did when I drifted into the past. He knew the stories. He knew about my father's "accidents," the so-called "incidents" that left people hurt or mysteriously missing. He knew what I'd suspected for years but could never prove—that my father had been responsible for her death and that he'd done it as coldly and calculatingly as he'd done everything else in his life.

Jacqueline. My mother, my heart, my promise. I'd taken that name as a vow, something to keep her close even when I was a thousand miles away on the other side of the world.

"She deserved better," I murmured, almost to myself. "Better than him. Better than I could give her, too."

Ryan's hand landed on my shoulder, heavy with the weight of a hundred shared battles. "Sergio, she'd be proud of you. You don't owe him anything, and you don't need to keep carrying this."

But I couldn't let it go. I could feel her presence with me in the quiet moments and in the nightmares that plagued me when I closed my eyes. She was my strength and the reason I kept going and kept fighting. And every time I thought about Mirella being anywhere near that man, the rage in me burned hotter than ever.

"I'm not letting him hurt her, Ryan," I said, finally breaking the silence. "No one deserves to go through what my mother did."

Ryan shook his head again, his voice resigned but knowing. "You're as stubborn as they come, my friend. But remember, Mirella's not Jacqueline. She's not someone you can just save. You're going up against your father. That's a war you might not walk away from."

I shrugged, offering a dark grin. "Wouldn't be the first time I've been in a fight that didn't favor me."

He laughed, a sound both amused and exasperated. "And here I thought all those close calls in the field had finally made you value your own neck."

I raised an eyebrow, glancing over at him. "You know me better than that, Ryan. My neck's never been the issue."

He chuckled, shaking his head again. "Fine, go after her. Play the hero. Just don't get yourself killed, alright?"

I flashed him a grin. "Wouldn't dream of it."

But my gaze drifted back to Mirella, and the grin faded. This wasn't some fleeting crush or childish love. No, it was a promise, one I'd made to my mother, to the woman who deserved everything and got nothing but betrayal and pain. I wouldn't let another woman fall victim to him—not while I could still do something about it.

I watched her. Ryan could tell me to back off all he wanted. He could remind me of my duty, my responsibilities, and the risks. But none of it mattered. This was personal, and I wasn't about to walk away.

Ryan glanced over at me, a glint of warning in his eye. "Just remember what we've got at stake here, alright? I don't want to lose my partner over some damned vendetta."

I nodded, giving him a reassuring smile, though I knew he saw right through it. "Relax, Ryan. I know exactly what I'm doing."

Ryan rolled his eyes, grumbling under his breath, but I barely heard him. My gaze had shifted back to Mirella just as she turned, her eyes finding mine across the room. The look she gave me was soft and vulnerable, as if she was waiting for something, someone to pull her away from all of this. She walked away from my father, and this time, I didn't follow her with just my gaze. My feet trailed after hers.

Mirella was by the punch table, swirling her glass in the way she always did when she was ready to disappear at any second. Her eyes moved around the room, wary but calm, like she was seeing the world through glass. That was Mirella for you, always wanting to be anywhere but where she was.

"Surprised to see you here," I said, strolling up beside her, leaning casually against the table. "I thought you hated these gatherings."

She looked up, and a tinge of surprise crossed her face before she smiled, that familiar hint of defiance in her eyes. "You thought right. I'd rather be just about anywhere else."

"Still avoiding the small talk, I see," I smirked, helping myself to a glass of the punch. I remembered how, as kids, we'd sneak off as soon as anyone tried to corner

us with questions. “Remember how we’d sneak out and make a game of rating the guests?”

A glint of amusement lit up her face. “And when we got stuck, we’d pick out random people to read and guess their entire life story based on nothing.”

“You think I’ve lost my touch?” I raised an eyebrow, grinning.

“Prove it,” she dared, crossing her arms as her eyes darted over to a tall man near the buffet table. “Alright, let’s see what you’ve got. Him.”

I looked the guy over. “Hmm... former athlete, peaked in high school, spends half his salary on a sports car he can barely afford. He’s probably here because he heard the host is connected, and he thinks he’ll ‘network his way to greatness.’”

Her laugh bubbled up, soft and real. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard her laugh like that. “Alright, that was a decent warm-up. Try her,” she pointed at a woman standing by the window, tapping away on her phone.

I studied her for a moment, leaning in closer to Mirella with a conspiratorial whisper. “She’s been roped into this by her boss, texting her boyfriend about how boring it is and thinking of excuses to duck out early. But I’ll bet she’s also texting her backup date, just in case the boyfriend flakes. She’s got options.”

Mirella’s smile widened. “Impressive. You haven’t lost your touch.”

“I still surprise myself,” I shrugged, and for a moment, I let myself just enjoy seeing her happy. Her laugh felt like some kind of achievement. I couldn’t help but grin at her. “You know, I’ve missed that laugh.”

Her smile faltered for a split second, and I could see something behind her eyes,

something she didn't want to admit to. "It's just been a while since I had anything worth laughing about."

"Funny. I seem to remember a time when you'd laugh at just about anything."

She tilted her head, challenging me with her eyes. "Well, people change, don't they?"

"Maybe. But some things stay the same." I leaned in closer, letting my tone turn serious. "Like your terrible poker face. You're hiding something, Mirella."

She stiffened slightly, her smile turning guarded. "Is that so? You think you can read me that well?"

"Oh, I don't think," I smirked. "I know. Which means whatever story you're about to tell me, I already know it's a lie."

She rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of a smile like she was playing along. "Alright, genius, if you already know I'm lying, why bother asking?"

"Because the truth's more interesting. But go on, humor me with the fake story anyway."

She paused, a slight smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Alright, here goes. I left because... I didn't know what I wanted."

I nodded, pretending to believe it, letting her spin her tale. "Of course, the classic 'I'm finding myself' reason. So, how'd that go? Did you find yourself?"

She gave me a long look, something unreadable in her gaze. "Not really. I guess I kept losing myself instead."

“Impressive. It takes real talent to lose yourself that many times,” I shot back, smiling as she glared at me. “But seriously, ‘I didn’t know what I wanted’?” I shook my head, clicking my tongue. “I expected something with a bit more flair.”

She huffed, but there was a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. “Alright, Mr. Know-It-All. What would the ‘truth’ sound like, according to you?”

I pretended to think deeply, tapping my chin with exaggerated deliberation. “Let’s see. You left because... you were scared. Scared of what you might mean to people or what people might mean to you. Or maybe you were scared you’d lose yourself if you stayed.”

She watched me for a long time, her gaze turning softer, almost vulnerable. “Maybe that’s a little too close to home,” she said, voice dropping just enough that I had to lean in to catch it.

For a moment, we just stood there. I could feel that old pull between us, the way it had been when we were kids, when we were friends, before my father became the wedge driving us apart. But before I could say anything, she cleared her throat, the mask slipping back into place.

“So, how about you, Sergio?” She leaned against the table, watching me with a teasing glint. “What is your truth?”

“YOU,” I confessed.

She laughed, shaking her head, and for a second, the Mirella I’d known so well was right there in front of me again.

“Still good at seeing what you want to see, I see.”

I sighed, leaning in closer, glancing around to make sure no one was watching before I grabbed her hand and pulled her behind one of the decorative columns. She gave me a look, half-surprised, half-amused.

“Listen, Mirella,” I kept my voice low, all joking gone now. “This isn’t a game. You don’t have to do this. Whatever my father has on you, it isn’t worth it. You can leave—leave now while you still have the chance.”

She stared at me, her eyes searching mine, and for a second, I thought I saw a crack in that armor she wore. But then she pulled her hand back, crossing her arms as if to shield herself.

“It’s none of your business, Sergio.”

Her voice was cool and detached, and it hit me like a punch to the gut. She turned and walked away without another word, leaving me there, alone with the punch bowl and an ache in my chest that I couldn’t shake.

MIRELLA

The moment I walked out of that party, I knew I needed to steer clear of Sergio. The way he looked at me—like he was peeling away every carefully constructed layer of armor I'd built over the years—felt dangerously close to... well, dangerous. It wasn't the kind of danger that I'd come to expect, either. This wasn't the power-hungry glint of Don Carlos's gaze or the cold calculation of men in dark suits. No, Sergio's gaze was something else altogether. It was something that pulled at memories I thought I'd buried long ago.

Sergio's warning kept echoing in my mind, stubborn and insistent. Leave while you still can. What did he think he knew? It was almost amusing, really. But there was something about the way he looked at me—so intense, so focused—that told me he knew exactly what he was saying.

It was almost like he knew me or maybe saw right through me, past my layers of polite smiles and cordial nods. That kind of familiarity was unsettling, especially because Sergio wasn't just anyone. He was danger personified, and he wore it as naturally as that infuriating smirk of his. But this wasn't about his father or his position. No, this was different. This was Sergio himself.

And to make it worse, he'd somehow grown even more devastatingly handsome. He'd changed from that boy who used to throw little stones at my window to a man with edges that could cut through armor. It was a dangerous game, and it was one I couldn't afford to play, especially now. I had a mission, and Sergio was the last thing I needed to distract me from it.

After I got back to the estate, my father's old house, which, fortunately, had been left in my name, hence why Don Carlos had not stolen it amongst others, I barely had time to pull my thoughts together before Enzo showed up in the study, looking like he was holding back a dozen questions. Typical Enzo. He didn't pry, but his eyes told me he was ready to offer advice if I needed it. Which, at this point, I didn't.

"Enzo," I started, trying to ignore the familiar pull of thoughts about Sergio, "Have you found anything? Even a small clue?"

He shook his head, almost apologetically. "Nothing. Your father's still completely off the radar. There are no sightings and no leads. He's made him vanish, and he's done it well. Even my source can't seem to find anything beyond the point we already know."

My heart sank a little, but I forced myself to keep my face neutral. I couldn't let emotion get the better of me now. "Then, we'll just have to dig deeper."

Enzo's gaze hardened, his jaw set. "We're doing all we can. I've got men working every angle."

"Not enough," I muttered, almost to myself. "He's out there somewhere, and I won't let him disappear." Taking a breath, I continued, "I don't know how much longer I can keep this act up with Don Carlos. He's pushing for marriage."

The slightest flicker of disgust crossed Enzo's face before he pulled himself together. "He's taking liberties he has no right to take."

"That's putting it mildly," I replied, keeping my voice steady. "But as long as he thinks I'm the perfect bride, he'll keep his guard down. And that's all I need to find out what I need to know. But I can't afford any distractions. Not even Sergio." The last part slipped out before I could stop it, and Enzo's eyebrows shot up ever so

slightly.

“Who is Sergio? Do you mean Don Carlos’ heir? How is he a distraction?”

I gave him a cool look, hoping to steer the conversation away. “Let’s focus on what matters. How’s our other business?”

Enzo’s attention shifted, his shoulders straightening. “The shipments are coming in as scheduled. There’s one from Colombia due any day now, and I think you’ll be pleased. Our distribution has reached new heights.”

“No,” I interrupted. “Pause everything. Shipments, transactions, all of it. I need you focused on finding my father, and if possible, I want a way to bring Don Carlos down.”

There was a moment of silence before Enzo responded, his tone bordering on frustration. “I can balance both. We’re running smoothly. You don’t need to worry.”

I crossed my arms, holding his gaze. “Not this time. All efforts go toward finding my father. No more shipments.”

Enzo exhaled heavily, crossing his own arms as he glanced toward the floor, clearly displeased. “If we halt now, it won’t be easy to pick up where we left off. This business doesn’t just sit around waiting, Raven.”

It was his nickname for me, one he’d used since we met during my first operation when I was still building my empire. He said it was because of my intelligent and majestic nature. So, when I was looking for an alias, I found it fitting. But now it made me pause, reminding me of who I was before all of this. That girl wasn’t afraid to stand her ground, and I wasn’t about to start now.

“That’s the decision, Enzo. Trust me, I know the risks,” I replied firmly. “And as much as I respect your work, finding my father takes priority. Besides, the faster we move on him, the faster we end this nightmare with Don Carlos.”

Enzo shifted his weight, looking like he was about to launch into a well-prepared rebuttal. But I cut him off. “Listen, I know you’re capable of balancing both. You’ve proven that more times than I can count. But this isn’t about capability. It’s about focus. All of it goes toward my father now. We have to be willing to make sacrifices.”

He met my gaze, clearly frustrated. But he also saw the determination in my eyes. “You realize what you’re asking for. It’s going to be a loss. Significant.”

I shrugged. “I’ll take the loss. The sooner we bring down Don Carlos, the sooner we’ll make up for it. Besides, I need you more than ever right now, and I trust you’ll figure it out. Focus, Enzo. No distractions.”

He grumbled, glancing away as if searching for the right words to argue back. He didn’t.

“You can count on me, Raven,” he conceded, giving me a half smile.

“I know I can.”

I closed the door softly behind me after telling Enzo goodnight. A glance down the hallway led me to Alex’s room, where I heard the familiar giggles and Dahlia scratching a pretend paw on the floor and making funny barking sounds. It was a game where he and Dahlia would pretend to be different animals, and I guess today, she was pretending to be a puppy. A smile spread across my face as I leaned against the doorframe, taking in the sight. There was Alex, crouched down on the floor, face-to-face with Dahlia, and he was absolutely beaming. It was rare to see him like this,

so animated, and every time I did, my heart swelled.

Alex turned, and his face lit up even more when he saw me.

“Mom!” He scrambled up, running over to me, holding onto my hand with his small fingers. “Can you tell me the story again?”

It was his favorite, the fairy tale he’d practically grown up with. It was the one about his father, the masked stranger who’d saved me from the ‘big bad monster.’ And each time he asked, I couldn’t bring myself to say no, no matter how many times I’d told it.

“Alright, get comfy,” I said, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. We both climbed onto his bed, with Dahlia curling up at the foot, her big brown eyes peeking up at us as though she wanted to hear the story, too, but she gave me a smile right before leaving.

I looked down at Alex, his eyes wide with anticipation. “Once upon a time,” I began, watching his face light up, “there was a beautiful, brave girl—”

“Was it you, Mama?”

“Yes, it was me,” I answered with a little laugh. “And this girl was in a very dark place, somewhere no one could find her. She felt alone and trapped. But then, one day, a mysterious stranger appeared. He wore a mask to hide his identity, but his eyes...” I paused, running my fingers through Alex’s soft hair. “His eyes were warm and kind, just like yours, and he gave her a gift—a chance to escape.”

Alex tilted his head. “But why did he have to leave?”

I sighed, feeling the familiar ache in my chest. “He had to go and save others, Alex.

He couldn't stay. He was needed elsewhere." I smiled, although the memory felt bittersweet. "But he always promised he would watch over us, even from afar. Just like the stars do at night."

Alex was quiet, but his eyes sparkled. "Do you think he's watching us right now, Mama?"

I nodded. "Absolutely. He's watching and making sure you're safe and sound. And he's probably very proud of how strong and brave you are, just like he was."

Alex beamed, snuggling against my side. "I wish he could come back," he whispered, a glimmer of sadness in his voice.

I felt my heart catch, and I kissed his forehead, pulling him closer. "Sometimes, the people who love us the most have to go somewhere else to do important things. But that doesn't mean they're not with us. He's in here." I tapped his chest gently, right above his heart. "And right here, every time you look up at the stars."

Alex went silent for a few moments, absorbing the words in that way he had, serious and thoughtful beyond his years. Then, he reached up and touched his own cheek, glancing up at me, an uncertain look in his eyes.

"Mama, do I look like him?"

The question took me off guard. I looked down at him, truly seeing him for the first time in a way I hadn't—his little face, his eyes, those features that seemed like they'd been there forever but had somehow grown right in front of me. A smile tugged at my lips as I looked into his warm, deep brown eyes—the same color as his father's.

"Yes, you do," I answered, feeling my throat tighten a bit. "You have his eyes, so much like his. Warm, kind..." My voice trailed off as an image floated into my

mind—the stranger’s eyes. And then, strangely, Sergio’s. They were the same color and intensity. A peculiar thought crept up on me, one I tried to brush off. Was I just seeing what I wanted to see? Was I somehow creating connections that didn’t exist?

I blinked, clearing the thought. I looked back at Alex, who had a small smile on his face as if proud of something he couldn’t yet put into words.

“You have his eyes,” I whispered.

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MIRELLA

I closed Alex's door softly behind me, still feeling the warmth of his tiny hand in mine and the weight of his innocent questions lingering in my mind. A part of me felt lighter after telling him that story, but the other part? It felt... heavier.

The thought of Sergio crept back in, unwelcome and unsettling. Why am I even thinking about him? I shook my head as if I could clear the idea with a simple gesture. I had too much on my plate to get distracted by the past.

I turned down the hall, and Dahlia's slim figure appeared, heading toward me. She was more than just my assistant. She'd been my lifeline since Alex was born, almost like a sister—and there was no one else I could trust to be with him.

"Dahlia," I whispered, careful not to wake Alex, "how's he been settling in here?"

She crossed her arms, flashing me a reassuring smile. "You know him, Mirella—quiet but resilient. He's handling the move just fine. You worry too much."

I nodded, sighing, as the relief spread over me. "I can't help it. You know how reserved he is. But he's adjusting well, right?"

"Better than most kids would, I'd say," she said, her tone confident. "Alex has always adapted to change. It's in his nature, just like it's in yours."

A warmth grew in my chest as I looked down the hallway, imagining Alex sound asleep in his bed. But the guilt wasn't far behind, creeping up the sides of that

warmth, reminding me that the more time I spent here, the less time I had for him. I glanced back at Dahlia, setting my voice low. “Keep an eye on him. All the time. I want an update every six hours, even if it’s just a ‘he’s fine.’”

Dahlia smiled with a slight nod. “Consider it done. You don’t have to worry about him while you’re taking care of business. We’ve got it covered here.”

I forced a smile, though my mind lingered on the plan in front of me, the risks, and the time it would take. “Thank you, Dahlia. It’s only temporary,” I whispered, more for myself than her. “One day, I’ll get us both out of this.”

Dahlia’s warm gaze lingered on me, and I knew she understood. Giving her shoulder a quick squeeze, I turned and headed toward my room, hoping to drown myself in work and strategy. But as soon as the door closed behind me, Sergio’s face came to mind again.

Why did he have to warn me like that? And why did it have to come from him?

I sank down onto the bed, staring at the ceiling. Sergio. He was impossible, that was certain. I hadn’t seen him in years, but one look at him tonight had rattled me in a way I hadn’t expected. It wasn’t just because he was the enemy’s son now or the warning he’d thrown at me. No, it was something more, something that tugged at old memories I’d long buried. Memories of two kids who used to dare each other to climb the highest tree in the park and who used to run through the central park square laughing and teasing.

My hand drifted to my lips, an old habit I’d developed when I was deep in thought, and a wry smile crept up on me.

My first kiss .

Sergio had been my first kiss. The thought was almost funny now, the way we'd hidden behind his family's big cherry tree, giggling like two fools. The thrill of it was far too much for two kids. I could still remember how he'd looked at me, with those same dark brown eyes—serious, even then. He'd had this way of holding my gaze that made me feel like the only girl in the world.

Stop it, Mirella.

I scolded myself, rolling my eyes. I had no business romanticizing memories of some childhood crush. Those things were innocent and meaningless. Sergio probably didn't even remember any of it. We'd both grown up and moved on. Yet, the feelings he'd stirred up in me tonight felt anything but childish.

I sat up, rubbing my temples. Maybe he'd warned me because he was... what? Trying to scare me off? Or maybe he was just being the same reckless kid I used to know, trying to play some game. I shouldn't give him any more thought. He was danger wrapped in that handsome exterior, and I was smart enough to know better.

But you don't feel like ignoring him, do you?

The thought caught me off guard, and I let out a frustrated groan. This wasn't how I'd planned things. Sergio was supposed to be just another face in the mob hierarchy, another link in a chain I had to pull tight.

With a huff, I kicked off my shoes and moved to the window, looking out into the quiet night. I had enough monsters to face without adding this man to the list. But it was hard not to think about him. He'd grown up, just like I had. Gone was the boy who'd dared me to steal a basket of oranges from the store. In his place was a man, one whose presence now came with a different kind of thrill—a warning.

But despite my better judgment, I could still see those dark brown eyes, the way

they'd looked at me tonight. I hated the little flicker of warmth that rose up when I did. I was ridiculous. I wasn't some naive girl anymore. I was here with a plan, and I wasn't about to let the past ruin it.

And yet, the memory of his hand reaching out toward me, the same way he used to, stayed with me.

You're making connections that aren't there, I reminded myself firmly, shaking my head as if I could shake him out of it. Sergio and I weren't kids anymore. Whatever we'd once been was just a story from a lifetime ago.

Standing outside the heavy oak door of Don Carlos's office, I pressed myself against the wall, half hidden in the shadow. I wanted to walk right in, but the loud echoes had stopped me. The low rumble of voices drifted out through the crack in the door, just enough for me to catch fragments of an argument brewing inside. I shouldn't be eavesdropping, but then again, curiosity had always been my fatal flaw. Especially when it came to Don Carlos—and, well, Sergio.

Sergio's voice rose above his father's, rough and accusing. "You had no right to go after him, and you know it! He was unarmed; he wasn't a threat!"

I raised an eyebrow. Sergio questioning his father? This was a side I hadn't expected.

Don Carlos's laugh was dark and hollow. "You're getting soft, boy. You think anyone in our world gets to play by the rules? You do what's necessary, no matter the cost. That's how you survive."

There was a pause, and then Sergio's voice hardened. "That's not survival. It's a massacre. And it's wrong. There are lines, and you crossed them."

The old man scoffed. “Morals? You’re wasting my time with morals now, Sergio? This is about more than you, more than me—this is about our legacy.”

Their voices overlapped, and my pulse quickened. This wasn’t just a fight. It was a challenge. Sergio wasn’t backing down, and I leaned closer, holding my breath.

“And what kind of legacy is it if you’re just butchering people who stand in your way?” Sergio shot back, his tone dripping with contempt. “If this is how you’re running things, maybe it’s time to question who you’re doing it for.”

“Watch your mouth!” Don Carlos’s voice came out in a snarl, and I flinched, even from my hidden spot. “These are the prices we pay for power, for respect, for control. What’s weak, Sergio, is being too soft to pay them. And right now, that’s exactly what you’re showing me—weakness.”

I’d known Don Carlos long enough to recognize the scorn in his tone and the same twisted pride he had in breaking anyone who dared challenge him. I’d never have guessed that Sergio, of all people, would be on the receiving end. I thought he was just like his father.

Then again, I didn’t know much about Sergio at all these days, did I?

“You think I’m weak for calling out your mistakes? For refusing to turn a blind eye when you cross a line?” Sergio’s voice was cold, defiant. “I’m not spineless. I am just not blinded by greed.”

A heavy silence fell, and I waited, breath held, for Don Carlos’s reply.

“You think you’re noble, that you’re better than me because you have principles?” Don Carlos’s voice was low and calculating. “Well, principles are for people who don’t know what they want. When you figure it out, come talk to me. Until then, keep

your little ideas about morality to yourself.”

I felt a thrill of something close to admiration as I listened to Sergio stand his ground, even as Don Carlos tried to pull him down. Maybe he wasn’t so much his father’s puppet after all.

Straightening, I decided now was the time to make my entrance. No use pretending I hadn’t heard most of the exchange, though my expression stayed carefully neutral. I knocked, then pushed open the door and stepped inside, meeting Don Carlos’s gaze first. His eyes flickered with an unreadable glint—displeasure, suspicion, or maybe even amusement. But it was Sergio’s steely glare that held me captive. Those dark brown eyes were simmering with defiance.

Don Carlos motioned for me to come in further, his hand settling heavily on his desk as if daring me to step closer. “Mirella,” he began, his tone dangerously smooth, “it’s good you’re here. I was just telling my son that there’s only so much trust I can extend, especially to those who’ve betrayed it before.”

A hint of heat crept up my neck, but I kept my face calm. “Don Carlos, if there’s any way I can prove myself, I’m here to do it. What happened last time was an error in judgment.”

He gave a small, humorless laugh. “An error. Yes, and what an expensive one it was. You’ll understand if I can’t take your word at face value anymore, Mirella.” He glanced at Sergio, who looked away, jaw clenched, clearly wrestling with whatever storm his father had provoked in him.

I played the part of the naive girl—wide-eyed, almost hurt. “I know you have every reason to doubt me, Don Carlos. But I’m here to make things right. I had no idea... I didn’t mean—”

He held up a hand, stopping me mid-sentence, his expression turning sharp. “Enough with the excuses. Words are worthless, Mirella. It’s actions I’m interested in now.”

My stomach twisted, but I forced a hopeful smile. “Then tell me what I can do. I’ll prove it.”

Don Carlos’s gaze turned calculating as he considered me. “Proving it... that’s exactly what you’ll have to do. I’m putting you on tasks, things I’ll expect you to handle as if your life depended on them. Which it very well might.”

I nodded, bracing myself. “I understand.”

“Good. And as it happens, Sergio here is the best teacher you could hope for.” He gestured toward his son, a cruel glint in his eye. “He’ll be keeping an eye on you, making sure you don’t... slip.”

Sergio’s mouth twisted into a wry smirk, and the pleasure in his gaze was unmistakable. It was as if he were assessing me, already deciding how much trouble I’d cause him. Wonderful.

Of all people, why did it have to be him?

I swallowed, struggling to keep my tone respectful. “I’ll learn quickly, I promise.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” Don Carlos replied smoothly, leaning back with an air of satisfaction. “For your first task, you’ll accompany Sergio. Let him show you what true dedication looks like.”

Sergio turned, eyes locked on me, and the gaze on his face twisted into something almost amused.

Of course, he'd enjoy this.

He gave his father a curt nod. Then, he looked back at me with one eyebrow raised as if challenging me to protest. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

As we walked toward the door, he cast me a sideways glance. "Looks like you're stuck with me, princess."

I forced a smile, determined not to let him get under my skin. If he thought he could make this uncomfortable, he was sorely mistaken. But inside, my mind raced with questions, all of them directed at the man walking beside me.

Sergio.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm

SERGIO

Mirella

“Gosh, she is so beautiful,”

The car hummed quietly as we drove, the city lights reflecting in Mirella’s expressionless face beside me. She looked out the window, jaw set like she had no intention of talking. I leaned back, fingers drumming the steering wheel, sneaking a glance every now and then. She had this effortless beauty about her, like she’d just walked out of one of those old-school Italian films. Even though her hair was tied back, a few strands fell around her face, catching the light in a way that made them almost glow. There was something different about her since we’d last met. A kind of quiet strength and an elegance that didn’t rely on any charm or words. She was...intriguing.

Clearing my throat, I tried to bridge the silence. “So, you excited for your first ‘mission’?” My tone was light, a little playful. She didn’t even look my way.

“Thrilled beyond words.”

Okay, so this was going to be more difficult than I thought. I glanced over again, catching her rolling her eyes slightly, which, somehow, was even more captivating.

I smirked. “Listen, Mirella, if we’re going to be working together, maybe we could—oh, I don’t know—try to stand each other’s guts?”

She finally turned, one brow raised in disbelief. “Work together? You’re here to babysit me, Sergio. There’s no working together in that.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Think of it as a mentorship program. Like, you know, one of those internships.”

She scoffed, her lips twitching into the smallest smile—like she couldn’t help herself. “Right, and you’re what, the star employee?”

I shrugged, leaning into my seat. “I like to think so. Don’t let the scowl fool you. I am a delight. You will be thrilled.”

She went quiet, and I let a beat pass before asking, “So...you plan to give me the cold shoulder the entire time?”

She looked at me with that sharp, knowing gaze of hers. “I can’t say I’m thrilled to work with someone who grew up entitled, spoiled, and without a clue about the real world.”

“Oh, really?” I shot back, feigning offense. “Spare me the rags-to-riches speech. You grew up just as well-off as I did, remember?”

Mirella’s eyes darkened, a small spark of anger flickering. “Yes, and five years ago, I lost it all. Stripped away, every last thing. I had to start over and survive on my own. No family support. No connections. No safety net.” She shifted her gaze forward, her tone cool. “So maybe don’t compare us.”

Her words struck something in me, the raw honesty of it. I leaned back, genuinely curious. “And you managed it? You survived it all?”

She gave me a small, humorless smile. “If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

Silence fell between us. This version of Mirella was far more complex than the spoiled, helpless, rich girl I remembered. I'd underestimated her strength, and I had to admit, I respected her more for it. I tried not to let that show, but it was hard when she wore her strength like armor, this unbreakable resolve that was strangely alluring.

By the time we reached the warehouse, the tension had settled and was replaced with something closer to an uneasy truce. The warehouse had old and weathered brick walls and a faint glow of light spilling out from the high windows. Inside, it was a cavernous space filled with crates, shelves, and scattered equipment. The distant hum of machines and muffled voices echoed around us.

"This place," I started, motioning around, "is one of the quieter operations. We handle shipments and distribution and manage a few things here and there—nightclubs and casinos. Legal stuff."

Mirella raised an eyebrow. "And the illegal parts? Or are those kept 'quiet' too?"

I chuckled, impressed. "I'll save that part for the advanced class. Today's lesson is strictly above board."

She gave me a look that suggested she didn't buy my "legal" explanation for a second, and honestly, I wasn't trying too hard to convince her. As we moved through the warehouse, I found myself observing her more closely. She had this way of moving, of knowing exactly where to step without hesitating, like she was at home even in a place like this. For someone out of the game, she hadn't lost her edge.

"You know your way around here pretty well, don't you?" I asked, watching her take in every detail.

"Let's just say I learned a thing or two from my dad," she replied, keeping her expression neutral but her eyes alive with challenge.

I leaned against a crate, crossing my arms, letting my gaze linger. “So, what exactly do you hope to get out of this little ‘job?’”

She gave me a long, assessing look. “I’m here to show your father that I’m trustworthy. That I can hold my own.”

I laughed a little too loud, earning a pointed glare from her. “Trustworthy? In this family? Good luck with that.”

She shrugged, undeterred. “Maybe I just like the challenge. Besides, it’s not like I have much of a choice.”

Her words were true, but there was something more to them, something unspoken. “And yet, here you are, pretending you’re just another employee. I gotta say, I never pictured you being the workhorse type.”

She sighed, and for a brief moment, I caught a flicker of vulnerability before she looked away. “People change, Sergio. Sometimes, they don’t have a choice.”

I wanted to respond, to tell her she didn’t have to put on this front with me. But I knew that would be pointless. Mirella had built thick walls, and rightfully so. She wasn’t going to let them down for anyone, least of all me.

Clearing my throat, I pushed off the crate. “So, about those clubs I mentioned. They’re straightforward enough—big money-makers, no surprises there. I’ll give you the rundown on how we manage them. Just ignore anything that looks too shady.”

She smirked, glancing around. “Right. Because this place is the picture of innocence.”

Her sarcasm didn’t go unnoticed. “You know, sarcasm isn’t a great look on you.”

Her smirk deepened, and she tilted her head, challenging me. “Well, it’s not like I’m trying to impress you.”

I couldn’t help but grin at her defiance. She had that fire that was missing from most people I’d met, and it was refreshing, even if it came with a healthy dose of irritation. “Believe me, you’re doing a great job of not caring.”

She crossed her arms, eyeing me up and down with the same skepticism she’d given the warehouse. “And what exactly am I supposed to be learning here besides your unique brand of cynicism?”

I threw up my hands in mock defeat. “Alright, fine, I’ll give you the official tour. Come on, let’s get this over with.”

As we moved through the rows of shelves, I kept stealing glances, my mind fighting between focusing on business and the undeniable presence beside me. It was strange. Mirella had this way of commanding attention without even trying, and I found myself intrigued by her despite everything.

We stepped into the storehouse, and the heavy smell of oil and metal hit me, a scent I’d grown used to in places like this. Row upon row of neatly stacked weapons lined the walls, each piece polished and ready. Mirella scanned the room, her eyes sharp, taking in every detail with a blend of curiosity and cautious interest.

She glanced sideways at me, a mischievous smirk tugging at her lips. “So, Sergio, can you actually shoot, or are you just the one who shows off the guns?”

I laughed, crossing my arms. “Are you kidding? I’m the best shot here.”

Her eyebrow lifted in an unimpressed arch, and I couldn’t resist. I leaned back a little, the ghost of a memory flitting through my mind. “I’ve been shooting since I could

walk and a military stint right out of high school. I did two tours, actually.”

Her smirk softened slightly, curiosity replacing the challenge. I paused, feeling the old bitterness rise up, but I pushed past it. “My mom died when I was young, as you remember. I enlisted to keep myself from...” I shrugged, leaving the words hanging. It wasn’t something I talked about, not usually.

Mirella’s face softened, her eyes lingering on me, and for the first time, I saw something beyond the cool mask she usually wore. It was unexpected, intriguing, even.

“I got this, too,” I added, glancing at her with a half-smile and tapping the spot over my heart where I used to wear my badge of honor after being wounded in combat, “Purple Heart. Not that it means much in this line of work. But hey, for what it’s worth, I’m not exactly entitled.”

She held my gaze, her expression shifting from curiosity to something deeper. “Impressive,” she murmured, almost to herself. Then, her eyes lit up again, that playfulness reappearing. “Well, then, Mr. Purple Heart, care to teach me how to shoot?”

My eyebrow shot up. “You want me to teach you? Think you can handle it?”

Mirella laughed, rolling her eyes. “Are you just going to talk, or are you going to show me how?”

I shook my head, grinning. “Fine. But if you’re terrible, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I handed her one of the guns, a small piece, just enough for a beginner. “Alright, grip it like this.”

She took it, but her hold was too loose, and her posture was all wrong. Suppressing a

smirk, I moved behind her, reaching out to adjust her hands, guiding her fingers over the metal grip. “Here, like this,” I murmured, my voice low, and she stilled, her eyes locked on mine.

There was a sudden closeness between us, a quiet sort of tension, and I felt her breath catch slightly. I moved her hands into position, my own fingers lingering maybe a second too long. Her perfume was light and fresh. She smelled like cherries and somehow out of place in this dusty storehouse. The scent lingered in the air, and I found myself leaning closer, just enough to feel the warmth radiating from her. I wanted to spin her around, to have my hands wrap tighter.

“You don’t need to do too much when holding a gun,” I whispered, her gaze shifted and locked on mine.

“I don’t feel there is ever a thing like too much,” she whispered, her breath hitched and mingled against mine. She was daring me. She knew how much the sight of her drove me crazy. She knew she was the object of my desire, and her eyes told the very story mine did.

I want you.

I did. I wanted to feel my tongue intertwined with hers with every breath in me. Like that night, I wanted to touch every inch and curve of her.

“What next, teacher?” she asked, her voice not just teasing me, but daring me.

There was nothing I wanted more to do now than pin her against one of those barrels, against the crates, to have my face buried in her neck, kissing it, trailing all the way to her shoulders, which were bare because of the sleeveless dress she effortlessly wore.

“Now, keep your shoulders steady,” I whispered, watching as she took a slow breath,

her gaze never breaking from the target. But my gaze was on her. She remained composed, though I could feel her heart racing a little bit faster. I wasn't sure if it was because of the gun in her fingers or my hands on her body.

"Like this?" Her voice was barely audible, more of a murmur than a question.

I adjusted her stance, my hands on her shoulders now, guiding her carefully. "Just like that. But keep your focus steady." Her hair brushed against my cheek as she turned her head slightly, and I had to clear my throat, pushing aside whatever was stirring in the air between us. "Ready?"

She nodded, eyes narrowing on the target, and pulled the trigger. The shot went wide, completely missing, and she laughed a little too easily, tilting her head up to look at me. "Beginner's nerves."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Well, I didn't expect a bullseye, but come on. I thought you'd at least hit the target."

She nudged me playfully. "Care to bet on the next one?"

"Alright," I said, playing along. "What are we betting?"

She shrugged, a smile playing on her lips. "If you win, I'll admit you're not just another spoiled, entitled kid. If I win, you have to admit I'm the better shot."

I raised a brow, accepting the challenge with a grin. "Deal. Good luck, rookie."

She took another shot, this time aiming with more focus. The bullet sliced through the air and, to my surprise, hit dead-center. Mirella lowered the gun, casting me a triumphant look. "Guess it's beginner's luck."

I laughed, unable to hide my surprise. “Beginner’s luck, huh? Well, color me impressed.”

She shrugged casually, her eyes sparkling. “Guess I’ve got hidden talents.”

“Hidden gems,” I murmured.

“You say?” she asked, her eyes widened.

Just then, Ryan entered, his footsteps echoing through the space. He gave me a quick nod, his expression tense. “Shipment’s ready, Sergio.”

I straightened, the hint of playfulness vanishing from my face. “Good. Mirella, get ready. We’re heading out on a little road trip tomorrow. Hope you’re up for the task.”

She flashed me a smile, looking unfazed. “I’m up for it. Let’s see if you can keep up.”

She left, the echo of her steps fading, and Ryan gave me a hard look, raising his brows. “Careful, Sergio. She’s...well, she’s going to be your father’s wife.”

I forced a chuckle, waving off his concern. “It’s just work, Ryan. Nothing more.”

But even as I said it, I knew it sounded hollow. There was something about Mirella—something that lingered long after she was gone.

She was going to be the death of me.

MIRELLA

The city lights blurred as I sped down the highway. New York has always had a way to my heart and could distract me with its vibrancy. But today, it could not. The quiet hum of the engine was the only sound in the car. My mind was a mess of images and sensations—Sergio’s warm breath against my skin, the weight of his hands guiding mine, the way his voice dropped when he whispered instructions. For a brief moment, it felt like we were the only two people in the world.

And then, almost without thinking, I’d tilted my head. He’d leaned in just enough for me to catch his scent—woody and sharp, like danger wrapped in charm. It was stupid, reckless, and entirely too tempting. A kiss was one step away, and I barely stopped myself.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, shaking my head. Sergio was a time bomb, and I’d be a fool to let myself get caught in his blast radius. I knew better. I had to know better. My heart had already been chewed up and spit out by one man who turned my world upside down. That stranger from years ago left me shattered when he died trying to save me, a death that still haunts me today. If I had said no to him, he would still be alive and now. I had nothing to show for it except a hollow ache and a father who’d vanished into thin air.

Love wasn’t just a weakness. It was a liability. In our world, you can’t afford liabilities. I repeated that to myself, over and over, as the city blurred past me.

But no matter how hard I tried to push Sergio out of my mind, he kept slipping back in. There was something about him—something I couldn’t ignore. He wasn’t just

danger. He was something more, something familiar. I didn't trust it, but I couldn't stop myself from being drawn to it, either.

By the time I pulled into my driveway, I was more exhausted by my thoughts than the day itself. I walked into my home, kicking off my heels, and headed straight for my study. The dim glow of the desk lamp cast long shadows across the room as I sat down and opened my laptop.

Raven. That's who I was now. Not Mirella, the girl who loved fairy tales and dreamed of simpler days. Raven didn't have time for dreams. She had goals, a reputation, and a territory to protect. And right now, that territory was about to be threatened.

For months, Enzo and I had been monitoring the shipment Ryan had talked about. It would be one of the largest shipments they have received in years—guns, drugs, name it all. It was almost like Don Carlos was preparing for a fucking war, a war he was going to win if I didn't stop him.

I clicked through my encrypted files until I found the confirmation I needed. Soho. Tomorrow. Don Carlos was moving his precious cargo right into a zone I'd been eyeing for months. It was the perfect opportunity, and I wasn't about to let it slip away.

I grabbed my phone and called Enzo.

He walked in a few minutes later, his grin already telling me he was about to start trouble. "You only call me to this office when you're plotting something big. Should I be worried?"

I rolled my eyes, gesturing for him to sit. "Don Carlos is moving a shipment through Soho tomorrow. I just confirmed it."

His grin widened. “And here I thought you told me to focus solely on your father. Now you’re dragging me into shipment business?”

“It’s all connected,” I smirked, trying to hide my defeat. Though the truth was, I hated it when he was right.

Enzo leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. “All connected, huh? You’re sounding suspiciously like me. And here I thought you didn’t want to get your hands dirty with his operations.”

“This isn’t about him,” I said, but even I wasn’t convinced. “It’s about territory. If we intercept that shipment, we can cripple his standing in Soho. You’ve seen the numbers. That loss would hit him where it hurts.”

Enzo raised a brow. “And Sergio? Where does he fit into this neat little plan of yours? Yes, I dug into him. He’s Don Carlos’s son with a military background. Somehow, you two seem to have been close friends.”

My stomach twisted at the mention of his name. I kept my expression neutral. “He’s just collateral. He’s working for his father. So it’s nothing personal.”

Enzo didn’t buy it for a second. “Nothing personal? Mirella, you’ve got that look. The same one you had when you were about to get tangled up with some mess. How do we know Sergio isn’t just as bad—or worse—than his father?”

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. “I know him, Enzo. We were kids together. We grew up together. He’s not like Don Carlos.”

“You knew him,” Enzo corrected, his tone sharp. “People change, especially in this line of work. You can’t afford to get sentimental.”

His words hit harder than I wanted to admit. I stared at my desk, the weight of everything pressing down on me. “I’m not sentimental,” I muttered. “I’m focused.”

“Focused?” Enzo leaned forward, his voice lowering. “Then explain why you’re hesitating. If this were anyone else, you wouldn’t bat an eye. We would be talking about how to bring down the fucking ground down. We have the men to rain down hell on them.”

He was right, and I hated it. I hated the knot in my chest every time Sergio’s name came up. I hated the way my mind replayed the way he looked at me—like I was someone worth knowing.

Enzo sighed, leaning back again. “Listen. You know what weakness does in our world. When bullets start flying, you don’t have time to think about feelings. You have to act.”

I met his gaze, forcing myself to look calm. “I’m not weak, Enzo. I’m on top of this.”

“You’d better be,” he said, his tone softening just slightly. “Because the moment you let someone get under your skin, it’s game over. You, of all people, should know this, but we need to plan. This won’t be an easy operation,”

We spent the next hour strategizing. Enzo mapped out routes and contingencies, his sharp mind turning plans into something almost foolproof. The whole time, a small voice in the back of my head whispered that I was betraying Sergio. But I silenced it. This was business. Nothing personal.

By the time we were done, I was exhausted. Enzo stood, stretching before heading for the door. He paused, looking back at me. “You sure you’re ready for this?”

I nodded. “I’m ready.”

He smirked, shaking his head. “If you say so, Raven.”

When the door clicked shut, I leaned back in my chair, staring at the ceiling. Raven was ready. Raven was focused. Mirella, though? She was another story entirely. I needed to take a shower and wash out all these intrusive thoughts.

The hot water hit my shoulders, washing away the grime of the day, but it did nothing to clear my head. Sergio’s touch lingered like a ghost, impossible to shake. I closed my eyes, and the memory of his hands guiding mine came rushing back. His voice had been steady, his tone low and almost teasing. And the way he leaned in—it was maddening. He’d been so close, his breath warm against my ear. For a moment, it felt like the world had stopped.

I turned the water to cold, shivering as the chill snapped me back to reality. This wasn’t the time to lose focus. Enzo’s words echoed in my mind: You can’t afford weakness. When bullets fly, you need to act.

He was right. I couldn’t let myself get distracted by a man, even if that man was Sergio—especially because that man was Sergio. He was a complication I couldn’t afford.

Wrapping a towel around me, I stepped out of the shower and grabbed my phone from the bedside table. A text lit up the screen.

“ You up?”

My heart jumped as I saw the ID and picture that confirmed my darkest thought. Sergio. How had he even gotten my number? Then I remembered—when I came back to New York, I’d listed it on my dad’s address records, trying to blend in and appear normal—a normal daughter of a powerful man, not someone with secrets buried deeper than most people could imagine.

I hesitated, my thumb hovering over the keyboard. Before I could respond, my phone buzzed again. This time, it was a call. Why was he calling? I didn't want to talk to him. That was a lie, I wanted to. I wanted to hear what his voice sounded like from the echoes of a telephone. Would it still have the same effect on me the way it did when he was an inch away from me?

I picked up, keeping my voice steady. "What do you want, Sergio?" I didn't mean to come off as apprehensive, but I was already frustrated by the way thoughts of him were clouding all my rational ones.

"I couldn't sleep," he said, his tone light but edged with something deeper. "Figured you might be awake too."

I leaned back against the pillows, trying to keep my voice casual. "And why's that?"

"Because you never could stay calm the night before something big," he responded, a smile in his words. "You'd always be up, pacing or planning some elaborate scheme."

"That was a long time ago," I said, though I couldn't help the small grin tugging at my lips. "I'm not the same person I was back then."

"Neither am I," he admitted, his voice softening. "But some things don't change. Like how you always take on more than you should."

I rolled my eyes, though he couldn't see it. "I can handle myself."

"I know you can," he said, a note of concern slipping through. "But this isn't just another day in the park. You don't have to go tomorrow, Mirella. Let me handle it."

His words caught me off guard. There was a care in his voice I hadn't expected, and

it disarmed me in a way I wasn't ready for. "You're worried about me?"

"You're not invincible," he said plainly. "I know you like to act like you are, but... just be careful. It is not worth proving anything to my dad."

A beat of silence passed between us. I didn't know what to say, and Sergio, surprisingly, didn't push. Instead, his tone shifted, lighter, teasing. "Do you remember that time you tried to climb that tree in your backyard?"

I laughed, the memory rushing back. "You mean the time I successfully climbed it? I don't remember you helping much."

"That's because you wouldn't let me. You were too busy yelling that you didn't need anyone's help," he shot back. "And then you got stuck."

I groaned, the embarrassment still fresh. "I did not get stuck. I just paused to appreciate the view."

"Sure," he said, clearly grinning. "And who was it that had to climb up and help you down when you started crying?"

"I did not cry," I protested, though I couldn't stop smiling. "And you didn't exactly help. You made fun of me the whole way down."

"I was ten," he said, laughing. "Cut me some slack."

We fell into an easy rhythm, trading stories from the past. He reminded me of the time I dared him to steal cookies from my dad's kitchen, and I brought up the time he tripped into a fountain trying to impress some girl at a party. It felt natural, like slipping into an old pair of shoes. For a moment, the tension between us didn't exist.

But then the laughter faded, and his voice softened again. “I’ve always wanted to protect you, you know.”

The words hit something deep inside me, and I didn’t know how to respond. Protect me? From what? From himself? From the world we were both tangled in?

I forced a smile into my voice, trying to keep things light. “I don’t need protecting, Sergio. Not then, not now.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “But it doesn’t stop me from wanting to.”

The silence that followed was heavy, and for once, I didn’t know how to break it. My walls felt thinner than they’d been in years, and Sergio was standing too close. I was dangerously close to letting him in, and I couldn’t afford that. Not now.

“Sergio,” I began, but the words stuck in my throat. Instead, I chose to run. I pressed down on the red button, ending the call and letting out an exasperated gasp.

These feelings were reckless, and when bullets started flying, these feelings were going to get me killed.

SERGIO

Don Carlos stood in the middle of the room like he was holding court. I dared not call him father. He was no father of mine. All I do is try to endure and stop myself from aiming higher next time I have a gun in my hands and he is in front of me. His hands rested on the back of his chair, and his voice was cold enough to freeze fire. “You know what’s at stake, Sergio. If you fail, you’ll bring shame on this family, and shame is something I don’t forgive.”

I almost cackled at the thought of bringing shame to a family I would rather cut tiles with—a family name I would put into extinction if I had a chance. It was almost laughable. But I held back.

I leaned against the wall, arms crossed, letting him rant. He loved his theatrics. His voice carried the weight of years of threats, but I didn’t flinch. I’d heard it all before.

“Are you done?” I asked, my tone sharper than a blade.

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t test me, boy.”

Boy. That word grated on my nerves. I straightened, stepping closer. “You don’t have to remind me of what’s at stake. I know better than anyone.”

“You act like you’re untouchable,” he squinted his gaze, his voice rising. “One slip, and—”

“One slip, and I’ll fix it,” I cut him off. “I’ve been cleaning up messes for this family

long before you noticed.”

His jaw tightened, but he didn’t argue. He knew better. I turned to leave before he could spit out another lecture. Behind me, I heard him mutter something about my attitude, but I let it slide—for now.

The drive was long, but the company was interesting. Mirella sat in the passenger seat. Her gaze was fixed on the road ahead. But every so often, she’d glance at me. I caught her once, and she quickly looked away, pretending to be fascinated by the scenery.

I couldn’t help but smile. She was terrible at hiding things.

Ryan sat in the back, humming along to some old rock song playing on the radio. “This is a nice change of pace,” he said. “Usually, these trips are just me and you, Sergio. Miserable silence and your bad music.”

“Hey, my music’s great,” I retorted with a hint of playfulness in my tone, turning up the volume just to annoy him.

Mirella laughed softly, and it made the whole car feel lighter. “Bad music is an understatement,” she teased and let out a chuckle.

I feigned offense. “You too? I thought you had better taste, Mirella.”

She smirked. “I do. That’s why I know this is terrible.”

Ryan leaned forward, grinning. “Finally, someone who gets it. Mirella, you might be my favorite person now.”

“Glad to know I’ve got someone on my side,” she teased, her voice sounding almost

taunting, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

I shook my head, pretending to be hurt. “Traitors. Both of you.”

By the time we reached the hotel, the sun was already setting. We normally make use of the road during trips like this, trying not to raise suspicion. But it was also exhausting and took longer, and now, the night was already painting the sky in shades of orange and purple. We checked in quickly, each taking a room. But instead of retreating to rest, we ended up in Ryan’s room, sharing stories over the cheap snacks he always managed to pack.

Ryan was mid-sentence about a mission we’d been on years ago when he paused, pointing at Mirella. “Did Sergio ever tell you how he saved my life?”

Mirella tilted her head, curious. “No, he didn’t.”

I groaned, already regretting being here. “Ryan, don’t—”

“Oh, I’m telling her,” Ryan declared, ignoring me. “So, there we were, pinned down by enemy fire—”

“It wasn’t that dramatic,” I interrupted.

“Let me have this,” Ryan snarled in a playful tone, waving me off. “Anyway, we were pinned down. I was out of ammo, and this idiot here runs straight into the open, bullets flying everywhere, just to pull me out of there.”

Mirella’s eyes widened, a mix of admiration and disbelief. “You did that?”

I shrugged, uncomfortable under her gaze. “He would’ve done the same for me.”

Ryan snorted. “I’m not as crazy as you. But yeah, he’s the reason I’m here today.”

Mirella smiled softly, her gaze lingering on me. “That’s... impressive.”

“It was reckless,” I said, trying to downplay it. “Don’t let him make it sound like I’m some kind of hero.”

Ryan leaned back, crossing his arms. “You’ll never admit it, but you are.”

The room fell quiet for a moment, the weight of his words lingering. I had never felt like a hero. It was something I did without thinking, and even if the outcome would have been different, I would have still done it. Mirella looked like she wanted to say something, but instead, she just nodded, her expression thoughtful.

The conversation shifted. I couldn’t help but keep glancing at Mirella. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her legs crossed, her posture relaxed. Every time she laughed or smiled, it felt like the room got a little brighter.

She caught me staring once, raising an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, looking away.

Ryan noticed and smirked, but thankfully, he didn’t say anything. For once, he decided to let it slide.

Later, when we finally decided to call it a night, I lingered in the hallway as Mirella opened her door.

“You good?” I asked, my voice quieter than usual.

She looked back at me, her expression unreadable. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

I shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. “Just... tomorrow’s a big day. If you’re nervous or anything—”

“I’m not,” she cut in, her tone firm but not unkind. “I told you. I can handle myself. You don’t have to be a hero all the time.”

I nodded, but something about her tone made me pause. “I know you can. Just... be careful, Mirella.”

She smiled faintly, the kind of smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Goodnight, Sergio.”

“Goodnight,” I said, stepping back as she closed the door.

Back in my own room, I lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Don Carlos’s words echoed in my mind, but they weren’t what kept me awake. It was Mirella. Her laugh, her smile, the way she carried herself. She was a storm I couldn’t ignore, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to.

The next day, I stood outside Mirella’s door, my hand hovering over the wood for a moment before knocking. The hallway was too quiet, and every sound seemed amplified—the soft hum of the air conditioning, the distant murmur of someone talking. I wasn’t sure why I was here that early, but something about the thought of sharing breakfast with her before the chaos felt necessary.

Three sharp knocks. I shifted my weight, waiting. A few seconds later, the door opened, and there she was—wrapped in a towel, damp hair falling over her shoulders, skin glowing as if she’d just stepped out of a dream.

I froze.

Mirella looked equally surprised, her eyes widening. “Sergio? What are you—”

“I thought you were room service,” she finished quickly, clutching the towel tighter around her.

I tried to look away, but my gaze betrayed me. The curve of her shoulder, the drop of water trailing down her neck, stopping right on her chest, the little flash of her round breast being closed midway by the towel—it all brought back memories I’d buried too deep--memories of her skin against mine, her breath mingling with mine, the taste of her. It had been a long time, but the thought of that night still haunted me in ways I couldn’t explain.

She cleared her throat, snapping me out of my daze.

“Sorry,” I muttered, stepping back. “I should’ve—”

She laughed lightly, cutting through the tension. “It’s fine, Sergio. What do you want?”

“Breakfast,” I blurted out, my voice steadier than I expected. “Thought we could eat before the shipment arrives later on. You know, to calm the nerves.”

Her lips curved into a faint smile, and for a second, I thought she might turn me down. Instead, she nodded. “Give me five minutes. Wait here.”

She stepped back into the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. I hesitated, then peeked in, catching a glimpse of her as she disappeared behind a partition. The room smelled faintly of her—cherries, citrus, and something floral I couldn’t place.

“Turn around,” she called out from behind the partition.

I turned, focusing on the wall, though it did little to quiet my thoughts. “You don’t trust me?”

“Not even a little,” she teased, the sound of fabric rustling in the background.

I chuckled softly, shaking my head. “That’s fair.”

A moment later, her voice carried over again. “I need a hand.”

I turned halfway, cautious. “With what?”

“My dress,” she said, stepping out from behind the partition.

She was holding the sides of the deep green dress she’d slipped on, her back to me. The zipper was stuck halfway, exposing the smooth expanse of her spine. My feet moved before I could think, closing the distance between us.

“Hold still,” I said, my voice lower than I intended.

She stood perfectly still as I reached for the zipper, my fingers brushing her skin. It was warm, soft, and familiar. The scent of her shampoo lingered in the air, and for a brief moment, I forgot why we were there. All I could think about was how close she was and how her breath hitched slightly when my fingers lingered too long.

I pulled the zipper up slowly, almost reluctantly. When it reached the top, I let my hand rest there, just for a second. Her skin was under my palm, and she didn’t move. Neither did I.

“It’s done,” I murmured, though I didn’t step back right away.

Her head turned slightly, just enough for me to catch the faint curve of her profile.

“Thanks,” she said softly.

The moment stretched and the ambiance centered between us. My gaze dropped to the curve of her neck, and I leaned forward without thinking. My hand stayed on her back, and I felt her shift closer, just barely. It would’ve been so easy to close the distance, to lose myself in her for just one more moment.

But then I remembered why we were there. The shipment. The stakes. Don Carlos’s threats.

I stepped back abruptly, my hand falling to my side. “We should go,” I whispered, clearing my throat.

She turned fully to face me, her expression unreadable. For a second, I thought she might say something, but she just nodded. “Let’s go.”

The elevator ride to the lobby was silent, but I could still feel the weight of her presence beside me. Every so often, our arms would brush, and it sent a jolt through me each time. I stuffed my hands into my pockets, trying to keep my thoughts in check.

“What’s on the menu?” she asked, breaking the silence as we stepped out.

“Whatever you want,” I winked, teasing her. “Your pick.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Generous.”

“Just don’t pick anything too fancy. I left my wallet upstairs,” I joked, earning a laugh from her.

That laugh—it was worth more than I’d admit. She is worth the fight. I know she said

I shouldn't protect her, but I will be there to protect her when she needs me. My existence, everything about my being, I live and breathe for Mirella now. She is the one I care about, the only one. I am not playing hero, but when bullets start flying, I won't think twice before taking one for her.

"Mirella," I whispered. She veered around to glance at me and my eyes met hers.

"Whatever happens today, know that I will be there for you. I won't ever let anything happen to you. I would rather die,"

She stared at me in silence. I meant it.

MIRELLA

The restaurant was quiet, tucked into a cozy corner of the hotel, with soft lighting and a faint melody of classical music playing in the background. Sergio had chosen a table near the window, overlooking a fountain. It felt intimate, too intimate for what this breakfast was supposed to be—a simple meal before chaos unfolded. Yet, sitting across from him, I couldn't help but feel the weight of his presence.

His hands lingered on me longer than necessary, and I knew I should have said something, done something to set boundaries. But truth be told, I liked the way he looked at me and the way his hands rested on my skin as if I was the only person in the room. It had been a long time since anyone looked at me like that—since the stranger, since that night. But today, I felt every bit of the emotions.

The restaurant was quieter than I'd expected. A corner table by the window offered a perfect view of the street below, but I barely noticed it. My attention was entirely on Sergio.

He sat across from me, his shoulders relaxed but his gaze intense. It was the kind of intensity that could make a person feel seen and unnerved all at once.

The waiter left after taking our orders, and silence settled between us. I fiddled with the edge of my napkin, stealing glances at him. The way his jaw tensed, the slight twitch of his fingers against the table—he was thinking hard about something.

“I didn't think you'd stay quiet this long,” I teased, breaking the silence. “Isn't this the part where you make some sarcastic comment?”

He smirked, leaning back in his chair. “I was trying to give you a chance to start. Thought you’d appreciate the gesture.”

“Very considerate of you.”

His smirk faded, replaced by something softer. “You’re still the same, you know? That fire. That stubborn streak.”

“And you’re still as annoying as ever,” I shot back, though my tone lacked the bite.

He chuckled, but the sound carried a hint of something heavier. His gaze dropped to the table before meeting mine again. “I wasn’t always like this. I was once a calm puppy.” He lifted his head, and his gaze locked with mine.

“Why are you staring?” I asked, feigning annoyance as I picked at the bread on the table.

“You’ve changed,” he said simply, leaning back in his chair.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

He smirked, the kind that made my chest tighten. “It’s an observation. You’re different. Stronger. But there’s still something familiar about you.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. His words felt like a double-edged sword, cutting through my carefully constructed armor while simultaneously drawing me closer to him.

“What about you?” I countered. “You’ve changed too. You left. Disappeared. The Sergio I knew growing up would never have done that.”

His expression shifted, the smirk fading. For a moment, he looked away, his gaze fixed on the fountain outside. “I didn’t want to leave, Mirella. But after my mom died...” His voice trailed off, and he took a deep breath before continuing. “I couldn’t stay.”

Hearing him talk about his mother was like peeling back a layer I thought was long gone. I remembered her—a kind woman with a warm smile who used to bring us cookies when we played in the garden. Her death had been sudden and brutal. It shook us all, but Sergio most of all.

I leaned slightly forward—curious. “I know it was hard for you, but I tried to reach out to you, Sergio. You pushed me away. You didn’t return my call or message. You just shut everyone out.”

He exhaled deeply, running a hand through his hair. “After my mom died, everything changed. I wasn’t the same kid anymore. Losing her... it messed me up. I couldn’t comprehend my feelings. I thought of ending it all more times than I would want to admit. I could have saved her, but I didn’t. That broke me, and I held on to that guilt for a long time.”

I blinked, caught off guard by his honesty. “Sergio, I had no idea. You never said anything.”

“Would it have mattered?” His voice was low, almost bitter. “She was gone. My dad became... well, you know how he is. And I couldn’t stick around to watch him turn into someone I barely recognized. He had always been a monster, but when she died, he became a beast. So, I left. That felt like the only way I could drown out the noise.”

“Why the military?” I asked softly, not wanting to push too hard but needing to know.

“It felt like the only way to escape,” he admitted. “After she died, my father wasn’t the same, like I already mentioned. All he cared about was business and power. There was no space for grief in our house and no room to breathe. I thought maybe if I left, I could find some kind of peace.”

I leaned forward slightly, resting my elbows on the table. “And did you?”

“Peace?” He let out a bitter laugh. “No. But I found purpose. The military gave me structure and discipline. It made me forget—at least for a while.”

I wanted to reach across the table and take his hand and tell him he didn’t have to carry that weight alone. But I didn’t. Instead, I stayed silent, letting his words hang in the air.

“What about you?” he asked, his gaze locking onto mine. “You disappeared too, Mirella. For five years. What happened?”

His question hit harder than I expected. I looked down at my plate, suddenly feeling exposed. “Life happened,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “My father’s business was falling apart, and I had to step up. I didn’t have a choice.”

“That’s not the whole story,” he pressed, his tone gentle but firm. “You were always the one who stayed, Mirella. What made you leave? I heard about the incident at your wedding with my father, how a masked man came, the video my father played. The Mirella I knew would still have stayed. Why did you leave?”

I hesitated, the truth lingering on the tip of my tongue. How could I tell him that I left because I couldn’t bear the emptiness I had created? I wanted to talk about the stranger—the man I had fallen in love with and who had changed my life in a night and how he had played hero and lost his life trying to save me. I wanted to tell him that every corner of this city reminded me of him, of us, of what we never had.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said finally, forcing a smile. “We’re here now, aren’t we?”

He didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t push further. Instead, he reached across the table and took my hand in his. His touch was warm and steady, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

“We lost a lot, Mirella,” he muttered quietly. “But some things don’t change.”

My heart skipped a beat at his words. I looked at him, really looked at him. For a moment, it felt like we were kids again, back when life was simpler and before grief, ambition, and betrayal tore us apart.

“You still think I’m that girl?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

He smiled, a genuine one this time. “I know you are.”

Hearing him talk like this made my chest tighten. The Sergio I knew growing up was fearless, always ready to protect the people he cared about. But now, sitting here, he looked like a man who had carried too much for too long.

“You didn’t even say goodbye. Maybe saying goodbye to the girl you used to know,” I whispered.

He looked up sharply, regret flashing across his face. “I know. And I’m sorry for that. I should’ve told you, but I didn’t know how. You were my best friend, Mirella. I didn’t want to admit I was breaking.”

My throat tightened, and I forced myself to keep my composure. “You didn’t have to be perfect, Sergio. I would’ve understood. I would’ve been there for you, just like you have always been there for me. This time, I would be the one bringing you down the tree.”

He reached his hand across the table, brushing against mine again. “I know that now. But back then, I thought I was doing the right thing. And then life kept moving, and I figured you’d moved on.”

Moved on. If only he knew how far from the truth that was.

“I missed you,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. “More than I realized until you came back, until I saw you a few nights ago.”

His fingers intertwined with mine, and the warmth of his touch sent a shiver down my spine. “I missed you too. Even when I tried to convince myself that I didn’t.”

The air between us grew heavy, charged with something unspoken. His thumb grazed my knuckles, a gentle yet deliberate motion that made my heart race.

“Sergio...”

He leaned forward, his gaze locked on mine. “You don’t know how many times I’ve thought about this moment—about us sitting here like nothing ever changed. Like we’re still those kids who had each other’s backs.”

I couldn’t breathe. The way he looked at me and the way his thumb gently stroked the back of my hand—it was too much and yet not enough. I wanted to pull away, to break the tension, but I couldn’t. I was drawn to him in a way that defied logic.

“Sergio...” My voice was barely audible.

He leaned in further, this time closing the distance between us. His gaze dropped to my lips, and I knew what was coming. My heart raced, and every rational thought vanished.

I felt my pulse quicken, the pull between us undeniable. “We’re not those kids anymore, Sergio.”

“No,” he said softly, his voice carrying a weight of longing. “But maybe we can still find a piece of what we lost.”

I didn’t pull my hand away. If anything, I gripped his tighter. The distance between us seemed to shrink, his face inches from mine. His breath was warm against my skin, his eyes searching mine for permission.

I didn’t stop him as he leaned closer. My heart pounded, every nerve in my body alive with anticipation. His lips were so close, just a breath away—

Just as our lips were about to meet, the sound of someone clearing their throat shattered the moment.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Ryan said, standing at the edge of the table with an awkward grin. “But the shipment’s here. Early.”

I jerked back, pulling my hand from Sergio’s as if I’d been caught doing something wrong. My cheeks burned, and I couldn’t meet Ryan’s eyes.

Sergio frowned, his jaw tightening. “What do you mean, early?”

“Got a call. They’re ahead of schedule. We need to move.”

I forced a neutral expression though my mind was racing. “I’ll meet you guys downstairs in a minute.”

Ryan nodded and turned to leave, already talking into his earpiece.

Sergio looked at me, his expression a mix of frustration and something deeper. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly, pushing my chair back. “Just need a moment.”

He didn’t press further, though his eyes lingered on me as I stood. I walked to the bathroom, each step heavy with the weight of what almost happened.

Once inside, I locked the door and leaned against the sink, exhaling sharply. My reflection stared back at me, and I barely recognized the flushed cheeks and wide eyes.

Pull it together, Mirella. This isn’t the time to lose focus.

I grabbed my phone and dialed Enzo.

“The plan’s changed,” I said the moment he picked up. “The shipment’s early. We need to move fast.”

His voice was calm, as always. “What’s your position?”

“I’ll let you know once I’ve got eyes on it. Be ready.”

“Always am.”

“Great,” he replied, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “What’s the plan? With this change, do we need to improvise on anything?”

“I’ll figure it out. Just wait for my order,” I said, my mind racing.

“And Sergio?” he asked pointedly.

I closed my eyes, gripping the edge of the sink. “He’s not the enemy, Enzo.”

“He’s not your ally either,” Enzo reminded me. “Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t,” I promised, though the words felt hollow.

Because deep down, I wasn’t sure I believed them.

I hung up, splashing cold water on my face before stepping out. Sergio was waiting by the elevator, his expression unreadable.

“Ready?” he asked, his tone clipped.

I nodded, my voice steady. “Always.”

I lied. I was far from ready because, after the last few minutes, I wasn’t sure if bullets started to fly, if I would freeze, or if I would be able to act.

SERGIO

It was about to go down. Just a few minutes and I would be able to breathe.

I stood in front of the buyers in the abandoned warehouse, a place I had chosen because of its distance from the town and multiple exits. It was a tactic I had learned in this business. The number of exits in a location sometimes determines if you would come out alive. I kept my voice calm and steady. They didn't look like the trusting type, and frankly, I wasn't in the mood to coddle them.

This was business, and right now, no one could be trusted. Not even your shadow. I peeked a glimpse at Mirella. She seemed unfazed. She sure knew how to handle herself in a tense situation. She didn't even let off that "It is my first time" attitude. Most newbies in the game do.

"The shipment's here," I said assertively, gesturing toward the crates stacked against the wall. "Premium quality, exactly what you're paying for."

The lead buyer, a wiry man with a scar running down his cheek, took a step forward. His gaze flicked to the crates, then back to me. "We don't pay for talk. Let's see it."

Ryan was standing off to my side, his hand twitching near his holster. Mirella was behind me, quiet but present, and I could feel her eyes on me. I'd been stealing glances at her all day, and every time, it threw me off just a little.

"Open it," I ordered one of my men, keeping my voice even. The top of the nearest crate was pried off, revealing what we were selling.

The buyer stepped forward, inspecting the contents. He didn't speak for a moment, but his expression gave nothing away. "Not bad," he finally said.

I didn't let myself relax. "Not bad doesn't pay bills. Do we have a deal or not?"

He looked at his partner, a thick-necked man who hadn't said a word since we arrived. They exchanged a nod. "We'll take it. Transfer's ready."

Before I could respond, a faint sound reached my ears—the crunch of gravel outside the warehouse. My instincts kicked in immediately. Something wasn't right.

I glanced at Ryan. He'd heard it too. "Stay sharp," I muttered under my breath. He nodded. It could be nothing, but it was better we stayed at alert.

"Let's get this..." I was about to conclude when all hell broke loose.

The first shot rang out like a crack of thunder, and the buyers dove for cover, shouting curses. I grabbed Mirella without thinking, pulling her down behind a stack of crates as bullets started flying.

"Stay here," I told her sharply.

Her wide eyes met mine, but she nodded, pressing herself against the wood. I turned back to the chaos, my gun already in my hand.

"Ryan, take the left!" I barked.

Ryan was already moving, firing back at the shadows outside the warehouse. My men were scrambling, some returning fire, others yelling orders. It was chaos, but my focus was split between the ambush and Mirella.

Another wave of shots slammed into the crates, and I heard her gasp behind me.

“Stay down!” I shouted, keeping my voice firm.

She didn’t answer, but I could feel her tension from where I stood. The attackers were closing in, their silhouettes becoming clearer in the dim light of the warehouse.

“Who the hell are these guys?” Ryan growled as he ducked behind a pillar.

“Doesn’t matter,” I snapped, taking aim and firing. “Just keep them off us!”

My chest tightened when I realized some of the attackers were making their way toward Mirella. There wasn’t time to think.

“Cover me!” I yelled to Ryan before breaking into a sprint toward her.

Without wasting a second, I darted as I reached her. One of the attackers grabbed her arm, trying to drag her out from behind the crates.

“Let her go!” I roared, firing a shot that hit its mark. The man crumpled, and I yanked Mirella to her feet.

“You, okay?” I demanded, gripping her arms.

She nodded shakily, but her eyes darted toward the chaos. “Sergio, the shipment—”

“Screw the shipment!” I cut her off. “You’re what matters.”

I didn’t wait for her to argue. Wrapping an arm around her, I pulled her toward a side exit. The gunfire behind us was relentless, but I kept moving, shielding her as best I could.

We burst out into the night, the cold air hitting like a slap. I turned to Mirella, scanning her for injuries.

“You’re fine,” I said, more to reassure myself than her. “You’re fine.”

She was trembling, but she nodded. “I’m fine.”

Ryan stumbled out a moment later, his face twisted in anger. “They got the shipment!”

“Let them have it,” I muttered, still holding Mirella close.

Ryan stared at me like I’d lost my mind. “You’re joking. That shipment was worth—”

“I don’t care what it was worth,” I snapped. My voice was sharper than I intended, but I didn’t care. “We’re alive. That’s what matters.”

Ryan muttered something under his breath, pacing in frustration, but I tuned him out. My focus was on Mirella.

Her eyes met mine, and for a moment, everything else faded. She was safe. That was all I needed.

The drive back to Don Carlos’ estate was suffocatingly silent. Ryan was fuming in the front seat, Mirella sat beside me, quiet as a shadow, and I was gripping the steering wheel so tight my knuckles ached. The failed deal played on a loop in my head: the gunfire, the chaos, and the moment I chose Mirella over the shipment. It didn’t matter how justified I felt; Don Carlos wouldn’t see it that way. The man I

called my father would never understand.

We pulled into the driveway, the mansion looming over us like a disapproving parent. Ryan slammed the car door shut and stalked off, muttering curses. Mirella followed me inside, her presence a steadying weight I didn't know I needed.

The moment we stepped into Don Carlos' office, his fury hit me like a freight train. He was pacing behind his desk, his face red and his fists clenched.

"You lost the shipment," he spat, his voice cold. "Do you have any idea what that cost me?"

I met his glare, forcing myself to stay calm. "It wasn't exactly a peaceful negotiation. We were ambushed."

"Ambushed?" He slammed his hand on the desk. "You had men. You had weapons. And yet, you lost everything."

His words stung, but I refused to back down. "I prioritized lives over goods. My men made it out alive, and so did Mirella."

He scoffed, his gaze flicking to her briefly before locking back on me. "You're incompetent. I trusted you with this, and you failed."

I felt Mirella shift beside me, and before I could stop her, she stepped forward. "Don Carlos, Sergio saved my life. The situation was—"

"Enough," he snapped, cutting her off. "This isn't about you, Mirella. It's about him failing to do his job. I gave him just one fucking job, but he comes here with some bullshit about all lives matter."

Her cheeks flushed, and she stepped back, her hands balling into fists. I hated seeing her dismissed like that, but I knew better than to push Don Carlos when he was this angry.

“I’ll figure out a way to get the shipment back,” I said through gritted teeth.

“You’d better,” he snarled at me, his voice like ice. “I don’t want excuses. I want results. And if you are not up to the task let me know. I don’t want liabilities.”

With that, he stormed out of the room, leaving a suffocating silence in his wake.

I exhaled, the tension in my shoulders finally releasing. Mirella stood by the corner, her expression a mix of worry and frustration.

“You didn’t have to step in,” I told her, my voice softer now.

She crossed her arms. “I couldn’t just stand there while he tore into you.”

I didn’t respond, too tired to argue. Instead, I made my way to my room, shutting the door behind me.

I was sitting on the edge of my bed, staring at the faint scratch on my arm from the chaos earlier. It wasn’t much, but the sting was a reminder of the mess I’d just crawled out of. There was a knock at the door, and before I could answer, Mirella stepped in.

“You should lock your door,” she said, holding a small first-aid kit.

“I’m not hiding from anyone,” I replied, leaning back against the headboard.

She walked over and set the kit on the bed. “Let me take care of that.”

“It’s fine.”

“Stop being stubborn.”

Her tone left no room for argument, so I held out my arm, careful not to give her the arm with the tattoo. I wasn’t sure if she would still recall her hands trailing over it that night, but I couldn’t take that chance. She knelt beside me, her touch gentle as she cleaned the wound. I watched her work, the way her brows furrowed in concentration, the soft curve of her lips.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“For what?”

“For stepping in earlier. For this.” I gestured to my arm. “For... being here.”

She glanced up at me, her expression softening. “I should be thanking you. You saved me back there.”

I shook my head, a humorless chuckle escaping. “I didn’t even think about it. When I saw them grabbing you, the shipment didn’t matter anymore.”

Her hand paused for a moment before continuing. “Why?”

Her hand stilled on my arm, and she placed the bandage over the wound. I didn’t respond. I didn’t know how to tell her all I felt, how she was the world to me, and how I would gladly choose her over the fucking world.

That would be saying too much. It could scare her away. Instead, I chose to say

nothing. She gently observed my silence, and when she saw that I was unwilling to respond, she spoke out.

“You’re not your father. You’ve built your own life and your own legacy. That’s worth more than any shipment.”

Her words hit me harder than I expected. I reached out, my hand finding hers. “You always knew what to say.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she tried to pull back, but I held on.

“You’re more than a friend, Mirella,” I blurted out before I could stop myself, my voice low. “You’ve always been more.”

She didn’t pull away this time. Instead, she leaned in just slightly, her eyes searching mine.

“I should go,” she whispered.

“Stay,” I said, the word coming out before I could stop it again. There was this edge Mirella had over me. With her, I felt safe enough to let my inner thoughts out. I felt safe to let out my struggles without the fear of being judged. “Please,” I added.

She hesitated. I could feel her resolve melting, and then, she nodded. I shifted over, making room for her on the bed. She climbed in beside me, and for a moment, we just lay there, the silence between us comforting.

I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her closer. “You asked why I chose you over the shipment.”

She tilted her head to look at me, her eyes wide and curious.

“The shipment can be replaced,” I whispered, my voice coming out a little bit shaky. “You can’t. If I had to choose again, I’d choose you every time.”

Her lips parted slightly, her gaze softening. “That’s... a lot to say.”

“It’s the truth,” I replied. It wasn’t a lot to say. It was the truth. It was exactly how she made me feel.

She rested her head on my chest, her hand resting over my heart. “Thank you for saying it.”

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “And I meant it. I’d take a bullet for you, Mirella. No hesitation.”

Her grip on me tightened, and for the first time in years, I felt a sense of peace I didn’t think I’d ever find.

SERGIO

I felt my lungs collapsing as the air whooshed out of them, slow and ragged.

I stood in the center of the room. It wasn't bright, and all the edges were so dim that I could barely make out where I was, but I knew exactly where I was.

I was home, one I hadn't stepped foot in for years but could never forget—the kitchen from my childhood. The heavy scent of burnt bread and cheap cologne lingered in the air. My mother stood by the counter, her back to me, humming a tune that had haunted me for as long as I could remember.

“Mom,” I called out, but my voice was swallowed by the room. She didn't turn around. Her movements were slow, almost mechanical, as she sliced bread with a knife that gleamed too brightly under the dull light.

I stepped closer, my boots scuffing against the floor, but she didn't flinch. I reached out to touch her shoulder, and she turned sharply, the knife still in her hand. Her face was pale, her eyes hollowed with a sadness I couldn't bear.

“You weren't there,” she whispered, her voice breaking like shattered glass. “You left me with him.”

“No, I didn't. I—” My throat tightened. The words wouldn't come.

“You ran away, Sergio. You thought leaving would fix everything, but it didn't. Look at me.” She gestured to her chest, and blood seeped through her dress, spreading like

ink on paper.

I stumbled back, my hands trembling. “I couldn’t save you. I was a kid—what could I have done?”

“You could’ve stayed,” she snapped, her voice rising. The knife clattered to the floor, but the sound was deafening. “You could’ve fought for me.”

Her body crumpled to the ground, and no matter how fast I moved, I couldn’t catch her. My hands reached out, but the room twisted and turned, pulling her away from me.

“Mom!” I screamed, but the darkness swallowed her whole.

I jolted, gasping for air, struggling to breathe, my chest heaving as if I’d been sprinting for miles. My hand shot out instinctively, gripping the edge of the bed as I tried to ground myself. The room was dim, the only light coming from the moon filtering through the curtains.

“Sergio.” Mirella’s voice was soft, pulling me from the remnants of the nightmare.

I turned my head, and she was there, sitting up beside me, her hair falling in messy waves around her face. She must’ve fallen asleep after tending to my wound. I had asked her to stay, but I wasn’t sure when we had both drifted into sleep. Her presence was grounding, but my pulse was still racing.

“It was just a dream,” she assured me, her hand brushing against my arm. I must have woken her up by the way I jolted out from my dream state.

I shook my head, the images still vivid. “It wasn’t just a dream.”

Her brows furrowed, and she moved closer. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I didn’t answer right away. Talking about my mother felt like reopening a wound that had never truly healed. But the concern in her eyes broke something in me.

“She blamed me,” I said finally, my voice barely above a whisper. “For leaving. For not being able to save her.”

Mirella’s hand rested on my shoulder, her touch warm and steady. “Sergio, you were a kid. There’s no way you could’ve stopped what happened. Also, she died before you left town. You were there for her till the end.”

“I know that,” I said, though the words felt hollow. “But it doesn’t stop the guilt. I left her to deal with my father alone. I could have stood up to him more when he treated her so badly right in front of me. I could have saved her from the monster he is. She didn’t deserve that.”

Mirella leaned closer, her hand moving to my cheek. Her touch was soft, and I found myself leaning into it without thinking. “You can’t carry that guilt forever,” she said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

I looked at her, really looked at her. Her words were a balm to a wound I didn’t know how to heal. The dream had been haunting me for years, and for the first time, I didn’t let myself wallow in feelings of guilt. Her words reminded and reassured me of things I already knew but wouldn’t let myself believe.

“Thank you,” I responded, my voice steadier now.

She smiled faintly, her thumb brushing against my cheek. “You don’t have to thank me.”

I glanced at her, her frame becoming clearer in the dim light. She was beautiful even in the darkness. Her hands on my cheeks sent shivers and electrical waves down my bones, shocking my very core and essence. Melting every will to fight the urges I had been battling ever since I saw her walk into the gala in that dress days back. I don't know what came over me, but I leaned in, my lips brushing against hers softly at first. She didn't pull away, and the tension that had been building between us for weeks finally snapped. My lips coiled gently in her as my hands cradled the small of her back, pulling her ever so gently to me. Her lips pressed against mine, and I could taste the sweet taste of cherries and berries just like I did years back, her soft palm still on my cheeks trailed down to the rough edges close to my jaw.

The kiss deepened, and I felt her fingers slide up from my jaw into my hair, pulling me closer. My hand moved to her waist, and I felt her shiver under my touch. It wasn't just a kiss—it was an explosion, a release of everything we'd been holding back.

Her lips were soft, warm, and tasted faintly of honey mixed with cherries. I tilted my head, deepening the kiss as my other hand slid to the small of her back again, pulling her flush against me. She let out a gentle moan against my mouth, and it was everything I had dreamed of since that night. She made another small sound in the back of her throat, and this time, it drove me wild.

I broke the kiss for a moment, my forehead resting against hers as I tried to catch my breath. "Mirella," I whispered, her name feeling like a prayer on my lips.

She didn't answer. She just pulled me back in, her hands gripping my shoulders. The pace increased, and I could feel something snap between us. I wanted her, and I could tell she wanted me just as badly as I did. My fingers found the edge of her dress, and I started to slide it off her shoulder, my lips trailing down her neck.

"Sergio, wait."

Her voice was quiet but firm, and I froze immediately, pulling back to look at her.

Her cheeks were flushed. Her lips were swollen from the kiss, but her eyes held a mix of emotions—desire, confusion, and something I couldn't quite place.

“We can't do this,” she said, her voice trembling slightly.

I swallowed hard, my chest tightening. “Did I do something wrong?”

She shook her head, her hands moving to smooth her dress. “It's not that. It's just... this was a mistake. We shouldn't be doing this.”

Her words hit me like a punch in the gut, but I nodded, forcing myself to take a step back. “I'm sorry,” I said, my voice rough.

She stood, her hands fidgeting at her sides. “I should go.”

I reached out, my hand brushing against hers. “Mirella, wait.”

She paused but didn't look at me. “Goodnight, Sergio.”

And then, she was gone, leaving me alone with the echoes of the kiss and the regret that followed. I stood up. I wanted to chase after her to confess all the secrets I had kept from her and tell her that I was the man who she had shared a night with years ago. But it didn't feel right. I moved to the window and saw her get into her car downstairs and drive off. She didn't look back. I paced back to my room desk, wallowing now in regret. Maybe I had done too much. She wasn't ready, and I had pushed too far.

“Fuck!” I cursed out loud. I picked up my phone, wanting to dial her number, but I stopped myself from going down that route. I was sure she needed time to process all

this.

I leaned against the edge of my desk, staring at my phone like it held all the answers to my messed-up life. My head was a jumbled mess of guilt, frustration, and—of course—Mirella. That kiss kept playing in my mind, over and over, like a song you can't stop humming even when you want to.

The screen lit up as I dialed Ryan's number. The guy always had something sarcastic or brutally honest to say. But right now, I needed that. I needed to talk to him and take my mind off Mirella. The ringing felt like an eternity before his gravelly voice finally came through.

"Are you still alive, or did Don Carlos finally finish the job?"

I exhaled a dry laugh, rubbing the back of my neck. "Barely. But let's just say I'm not calling to talk about my health."

"Should've known," Ryan muttered. "Alright, spill it. How are you holding up after Carlos tore you a new one?"

"I'm a mess," I admitted, pacing the room now. "He's furious about the shipment, which I get. But I can't keep doing this, Ryan. Being under his thumb? It's suffocating. I want out—now more than ever."

Ryan's tone shifted, the humor fading. "Sergio, we've talked about this. You want out? Fine, but you better tread carefully. The second Don Carlos sniffs out your plan, you're as good as dead. He doesn't let anyone walk away, especially not his son."

"I know," I said, frustration bubbling in my chest. "But I'm working on something. I'm gathering the manpower I need, building connections outside his reach. I just... I can't keep living like this."

“You sure about this?” Ryan asked. “You’re walking a thin line, man. One wrong step, and you’ll end up in a ditch somewhere. Probably one of Carlos’ ditches, too.”

I stopped pacing, leaning against the wall as my mind shifted to the ambush. “That’s not even the worst part, Ryan. The shipment being hijacked? That was too clean. They knew every move we were going to make, even with the last-minute changes. There’s a rat in our crew—I’m sure of it.”

Ryan let out a low whistle. “You’re not wrong. It was too precise. You think someone’s feeding intel to the other side?”

“Absolutely,” I said, the certainty in my voice surprising even me. “And I need you to figure out who it is. I don’t care what it takes—no stone unturned. Find the rat.”

Ryan was quiet for a beat before speaking. “You know... Mirella’s the newest addition to the mix. Could be her.”

I froze, the thought hitting me like a sucker punch. “Mirella?” I repeated, disbelief dripping from my voice. “She’s not a rat, Ryan. She doesn’t have it in her to hurt a fly, let alone sabotage an entire operation.”

“She’s the only new face, Sergio. It’s worth considering.”

“No,” I retorted firmly. “I know how it looks, but I’ve spent enough time with her to know she’s not the type. If you knew her, you’d say the same.”

Ryan let out a sigh. “You’re vouching for her pretty hard, man. Just saying, keep your eyes open. Trust is a dangerous thing in our world.”

I ended the call shortly after, my mind swirling with Ryan’s words. Mirella, a traitor? No, it didn’t sit right. She wasn’t some cold-blooded schemer. She was... well,

Mirella. The girl who tended to my wound with a gentleness I hadn't felt in years. The one who looked at me like I was more than just my father's pawn.

Still, doubt crept in like an itch I couldn't scratch. Could I be wrong about her? Could the kiss, her kindness, her presence—could it all be an act?

“No,” I muttered to myself, shaking my head. “Stop it, Sergio. Don't be an idiot.”

I ran my hand through my hair. Mirella wasn't the rat. She couldn't be.

Whoever it was, I'd find them. And when I do, they'd wish they'd never crossed me.

MIRELLA

“ Nice job out there,” the text message from Enzo lit up my screen. “You did great. Who knew you were such a great actress?”

Another text came in, and I placed my phone into my bag. I didn’t want to keep reading.

Was it all an act? Everything?

I closed the door to my house, leaning against it as I exhaled deeply. My heart hadn’t stopped racing since I left Sergio. The kiss. It replayed in my mind like an old movie I couldn’t shut off: his lips on mine, his hand grazing my cheek, the way he looked at me as if I were the only thing that mattered in the world. I pressed my fingers to my lips, feeling the ghost of his touch.

What am I doing?

Allowing myself to feel something for Sergio wasn’t part of the plan. If anything, it was dangerous. Yet here I was, thinking about him, wondering if he was okay and if his wound still hurt. Was he going to keep having nightmares? Was he thinking about me, too?

I walked to the kitchen, trying to distract myself. The sound of my footsteps echoed in the quiet apartment. Alex was in his room, probably playing with his cars or drawing. He was my everything, my reason for doing all of this. But as much as I loved my son, I couldn’t shake the loneliness that crept into my life like an unwanted

guest.

I opened the fridge, pulling out vegetables to chop for dinner. I had fallen asleep in Sergio's room, and when I left, I realized that it was barely six. I had thought it was late because of the storm he had awoken in me, and my mind refused to stay quiet. Sergio wasn't supposed to matter. He was just... Sergio... Don Carlos' son. A man trapped in a world of power and blood. Someone who could never really belong to me, not in the way I wanted.

And yet, I couldn't deny what I felt when he pulled me close or when his voice softened as he spoke my name.

I shook my head, gripping the cutting board harder than necessary. "Stop it," I muttered under my breath. This wasn't the time to lose focus. I had a plan, and I couldn't let emotions ruin everything. My father was still missing. The stranger who gave me Alex was gone because of Don Carlos, and I was left with more questions than answers. If I got too close to Sergio, I could lose everything I'd worked for.

But what if he's different? What if—

"Mama!" Alex's voice broke through my thoughts, high-pitched and filled with energy. He ran into the kitchen, his little feet padding against the tile floor.

I forced a smile, turning to face him. "What is it, my love?"

He held up a drawing, a colorful mess of shapes and lines. "I made this for you!"

I crouched down to his level, taking the paper from his hands. "Wow, Alex, this is amazing. Is that me?"

He nodded, pointing to a stick figure with bright yellow hair. "That's you. And that's

me.” He pointed to a smaller figure holding hands with the first.

“And what’s this?” I asked, gesturing to a big red circle above us.

“That’s the sun. We’re at the park.”

I ruffled his hair, laughing softly. “It’s perfect. I’ll hang it on the fridge after dinner.”

He grinned, his gap-toothed smile lighting up the room. Alex had a way of making everything feel a little brighter, even when my thoughts were dark.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

He nodded vigorously. “Can we have spaghetti?”

“Spaghetti it is,” I said, pulling out a box of pasta.

As I cooked, Alex sat on the floor beside me, playing with his toy cars. He made engine noises, narrating an elaborate race between his red car and his blue one. I couldn’t help but watch him, marveling at how much joy he brought into my life.

“Who’s winning?” I asked, stirring the sauce on the stove.

“The red one! He’s super fast. But the blue one is sneaky. He might win in the end.”

“Sounds intense,” I teased, glancing over my shoulder at him.

“It is! But don’t worry, Mama. I’ll tell you who wins.”

We ate dinner together at the small table by the window. Alex talked non-stop about his day, his time with Dahlia, and his grand plans to become a superhero when he

grew up. He was a bit chatty today, in contrast to his more reserved self. I listened, laughing at his antics, feeling a sense of peace.

After dinner, we played hide-and-seek. Alex loved hiding in the same spot—behind the couch—but his giggles always gave him away.

“Where’s Alex?” I called out, pretending to look under the table.

“I don’t know!” he yelled, trying to stifle his laughter.

I peeked behind the couch, feigning surprise. “There you are!”

He burst out laughing, throwing his arms around my neck. “You found me, Mama!”

“Of course I did,” I said, hugging him tightly. “You’re my favorite person to find.”

We kept playing through the night, and I noticed Alex rubbing his eyes more than usual. He seemed quieter, too, going back to his default setting, his energy fading.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked, placing a hand on his forehead.

“I’m fine,” he mumbled, avoiding my gaze.

I frowned, brushing his dark hair away from his face. His temperature felt normal, but something about his demeanor worried me.

“Let’s get you to bed, okay?”

He nodded, his little hand slipping into mine as I led him to his room.

I tucked him into his blankets, smoothing them over his small frame. His eyes were

already half-closed, but he held onto my hand, his grip firm.

“Mama?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Will you stay here until I fall asleep?”

“Always,” I whispered, leaning down to kiss his forehead.

I sat by his bed, humming softly until his breathing evened out. When I was sure he was fast asleep, I closed his door behind me and returned to the silence of the living room. My thoughts drifted back to Sergio, the warmth of his touch and the intensity in his eyes—the eyes that reminded me of the love I had once lost.

I sighed, sinking onto the couch. My life was already complicated enough. Adding Sergio to the mix? That was a risk I wasn’t sure I could take. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop myself from wanting him.

I settled in to sleep, but I couldn’t sleep. The kiss Sergio and I had shared earlier still lingered in my mind, making me feel things I didn’t want to admit. I shouldn’t have let it happen, but I couldn’t deny how much I had wanted it. It wasn’t just the kiss—it was everything he represented. Safety. Strength. But also danger—in more ways than one. My heart had been through enough, and I wasn’t sure it could take another beating, especially from a man like him.

My thoughts were interrupted by a faint clatter from downstairs. I frowned, throwing on a robe and picking up my phone before heading down. When I reached the kitchen, I found Dahlia leaning against the counter, a spoon halfway to her mouth, caught in the act of devouring a bowl of ice cream.

“Really?” I crossed my arms, attempting to look stern. “Midnight snacking, Dahlia?”

She gave me a mock guilty look. “Don’t judge me. It’s been a long day, and this is my therapy.” She pointed the spoon at me. “Want some?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks. I’m not in the mood for ice cream.”

“Wow, Mirella is not in the mood for sweets. This is serious.” She set the spoon down and eyed me closely. “What’s going on? You look like you’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. Enzo told me the ambush went fine. You should be happy,”

I hesitated. Dahlia wasn’t just my assistant. She’d been here for years, and even when I didn’t try to make it obvious, I considered her a friend, someone I could confide in when things felt too heavy. And right now, they were crushing me.

“It’s Sergio,” I admitted, sitting on a stool by the island. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. One moment, I’m telling myself I have to stay focused, and the next, I’m letting him kiss me.”

Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn’t look surprised. “Ah. The infamous Sergio. Enzo told me about him and how he was worried about the fact you two grew up together.” She smirked. “So, how was it?”

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. “Dahlia, this isn’t funny.”

“I’m not laughing. I’m just curious. You’re not exactly the ‘kiss and tell’ type.” She nudged me gently. “So, spill. Was it good?”

“Good?” I huffed. “It was incredible, which is the problem! I can’t let myself feel this way about him. I can’t afford to.”

Dahlia leaned against the counter, crossing her arms. “Why not? He’s clearly into you, and from what I’ve seen, you’re into him too. What’s stopping you?”

“Everything.” My voice cracked slightly, and I looked away. “My father is still missing. I’m supposed to be finding him, not getting distracted. And then there’s Alex... and the past.” My throat tightened. “What if I let Sergio in, and he leaves, too? Everyone I care about seems to disappear eventually.”

Her expression softened. “Mirella, you’ve been through a lot, and I get why you’re scared. But you can’t let your fear control you forever. And I don’t know him, but I have a feeling that he is a good guy for him to get you off your game like this,” she teased with a wink and a smirk still playing on her face.

I swallowed hard. “It’s not that simple. And let’s not forget I am still faking it with his father.”

“Love never is,” she said gently. “But you deserve to be happy. And maybe Sergio is part of that happiness.”

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed on the counter. I picked it up, my stomach sinking slightly when I saw Sergio’s name on the screen.

“Mirella, you need to be here early tomorrow,” his voice came through, tense and direct. “My father wants to see us.”

I frowned. “Why? What’s so urgent?”

There was a pause before he answered. “We’ve confirmed that it was The Raven who intercepted our shipment.”

My heart skipped a beat. How could he have found out? What else does he know?

Fuck. “The Raven? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Sergio responded in certainty, his tone clipped. “We’re going after her. My father wants her to pay for what she’s done.”

I gripped the phone tighter. “And what does that mean, exactly?”

“It means you need to be here. This isn’t just about the shipment anymore,” his voice softened slightly. “Just be ready.”

The line went dead before I could ask any more questions. I stared at the phone, unease settling in my chest like a stone. Why do I have to be there? Was my cover blown?

What else isn’t he telling me?

Dahlia was watching me with concern etched on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“Sergio’s father,” I responded quietly. “He’s planning something. And it involves The Raven.”

Her brows furrowed. “Do you think it’s safe for you to be involved? Shouldn’t you speak to Enzo first about it?”

I sighed, rubbing my temples. “I don’t know. But I don’t have much of a choice.”

Dahlia placed a hand on my shoulder. “Just be careful, okay? Whatever’s going on, don’t lose sight of what’s important to you.”

I nodded, though my mind was already spinning. I had tried to keep my two worlds from clashing, and now, with Raven in the picture, things were about to get even

more complicated.

But the question still remains.

Does Sergio know I am The Raven?

SERGIO

The sun was barely up when Mirella arrived at the mansion, her heels clicking against the marble floor like a countdown to trouble. She looked stunning. Too stunning, if I was being honest. Her red dress fit her like it had been designed with sin in mind, and her hair was pinned back just enough to show off her neck—a neck I'd spent too much time thinking about since last night.

I was waiting in the foyer, pretending to go through some papers, but all I could do was stare at her. The kiss we'd shared felt like a brand on my skin, and I was desperate to bring it up. Just once, to see if it had left her as rattled as it had me.

"You're early," I winced, trying to sound casual, though my voice came out rougher than I'd intended.

"I wanted to be prepared," she answered, smoothing the skirt of her dress like it was nothing—like she didn't know exactly how much she was throwing me off.

"We should talk," I started, taking a step closer. "About yesterday."

Her eyes flicked up to mine, calm and steady. But there was something guarded behind them. "There's nothing to talk about. It's in the past."

In the past? Was she serious? "Mirella, you can't just—"

"I can," she cut me off, her tone firm but not unkind. "It's better this way."

Better for who? Because it sure as hell isn't better for me. I wanted to push, to tell her it wasn't just a kiss, but before I could, the sound of heavy footsteps echoed through the hall. My father was waiting, and if we were late, it wouldn't matter what either of us felt about last night.

We walked to his office in silence. I wanted to tell her all I felt. But what difference would it make now? As we entered, Don Carlos was sitting behind his massive desk, sipping his coffee like a king surveying his court.

"You're late," he mumbled without looking up, though we weren't. He liked to say things like that just to keep people on edge.

"Good morning to you, too, Father," I greeted dryly, trying not to sound bitter, taking the seat across from him.

Mirella followed, sitting with her back straight and her hands folded in her lap like she was auditioning for sainthood. It was impressive, really, how composed she looked, considering the storm she'd walked into.

"I trust you both slept well," my father said, his eyes glinting with something I didn't like.

"Fine," I answered quickly, hoping to move things along.

Mirella nodded, keeping her response short. "Yes, thank you."

His gaze shifted to her, sharp and calculating. "That's interesting. I could've sworn I saw you leaving the mansion about an hour after you told me you were going home when you left my office yesterday."

My stomach dropped. Mirella and I exchanged a quick glance, but neither of us let it

linger. He couldn't know. Could he?

"I..." Mirella began, her voice steady despite the trap he'd just laid. "I wasn't feeling well after everything that happened. The stolen shipment, the danger—I was feeling overwhelmed. I went to cool my head in the guest room and must have dozed off. I didn't realize how much time had passed."

Her explanation was flawless, and she delivered it with a calmness that would've made any seasoned liar proud. My father stared at her for a long moment, his expression unreadable, before finally nodding.

"Ah, of course. Women can be weak when it comes to such things. Emotional. Fragile. It's natural."

My hands curled into fists under the table. I could feel the heat rising in my chest, and I was one second away from telling him exactly where he could shove his outdated opinions. But then, Mirella laughed, a light, easy sound that somehow diffused the tension.

"You're absolutely right," she said, her tone playful. "We women can be such delicate creatures. Thank goodness for strong men like you to guide us."

It was a masterstroke. She turned his insult into a compliment, disarming him completely. I hated that it worked, but I couldn't deny it was impressive.

My father chuckled, clearly pleased with himself. "Yes, well, it's good to see you understand your place."

I bit my tongue so hard I tasted blood. Mirella gave me a quick glance, her eyes saying let it go. For now, I did.

“Enough pleasantries,” my father continued, leaning forward. “We’ve confirmed it was The Raven who intercepted the shipment. She’s been a thorn in my side for too long, and I want her dealt with. You two are to do whatever it takes to bring her down and recover what’s mine.”

The room went silent. Mirella’s posture didn’t change, but I could see the tension in her jaw. The Raven wasn’t just a rival—she was a ghost, impossible to pin down. This wasn’t going to be a simple task.

“We’ll handle it,” I responded, keeping my voice even.

“You’d better,” my father snarled, his tone leaving no room for argument. “I don’t tolerate failure. You already failed once when you let her get away with the shipment. Twice would be inexcusable.”

As we left the office, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding. Mirella walked beside me, her face calm but her eyes distant.

“You were incredible in there,” I told her, meaning every word. “Quick thinking with the guest room story.”

“I’ve had practice,” she teased lightly, but there was a weight to her words that made me wonder just how much practice she’d had.

“About what he said...” I hesitated. “You know he’s wrong, right? You’re not weak.”

Her lips curved into a small, tired smile. “I know. But sometimes it’s easier to let people think you are. They underestimate you that way.”

I nodded, understanding more than I wanted to admit. We both had our masks, our ways of surviving in a world that didn’t allow for weakness. But as I watched her

walk ahead of me, strong and unyielding despite everything, I couldn't help but think she was the strongest person I'd ever met.

The engine hummed softly as we drove toward the next town, the morning sun painting the sky in streaks of gold and pink. Mirella sat beside me, staring out the window, her face unreadable. It wasn't the usual silence between us—the kind where tension hung so thick you could cut it. This one felt... thoughtful, like she was piecing something together in her mind.

Finally, she broke the quiet. "Sergio, you don't care about your father's business. Not really. So why are you so keen on bringing down The Raven?"

Her words surprised me. She had a way of cutting straight to the point, no dancing around the edges. I gripped the steering wheel tighter, debating whether to brush her off or give her the truth. This was Mirella, though—she'd see right through me if I tried to dodge the question.

"It's not for him," I said after a pause. "I couldn't care less about his empire. If it all burned down tomorrow, I wouldn't shed a tear. I wouldn't give a fuck."

Her head turned toward me, curiosity sparking in her eyes. "Then why?"

"Because of them," I gestured vaguely out the window. "The families, the jobs, the people tied to this mess. My father's business—illegal or not—puts food on the table for a lot of people. If we let The Raven and others like her tear it apart, they're the ones who'll suffer. Not my father. Not me."

She stayed quiet, letting my words settle. I could feel her studying me, peeling back the layers I usually kept locked away.

“But it’s not just that,” I continued, my voice softer now. “I’ve been thinking about ways to make it better. Safer. To legalize as much of it as I can. I’m not naïve—it’ll never be clean. Not completely. But it doesn’t have to be the bloodbath it is now.”

“You think your father would go for that?” she asked, skeptical but not dismissive.

I snorted. “Not a chance. He thrives on chaos and fear. But he won’t be in charge forever.”

Her lips twitched, a half-smile playing there. “So, you’re the future of the empire, huh? The golden boy with a heart of gold?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I grinned. “Maybe just a tarnished heart trying not to rot completely.”

She laughed at that, a sound that felt like sunlight breaking through storm clouds. For a moment, the tension eased, and I let myself enjoy the moment. But deep down, I knew it wouldn’t last. Not with where we were heading.

As we pulled into the town, I parked the car outside a café. Mirella looked around, her brow furrowing.

“This is it?” she asked.

“No, but we’re close. The Raven is known to visit a particular restaurant here. If she’s in town, that’s where we’ll find her.” I glanced at her outfit—a simple but elegant dress that was fine for most occasions but not for this. “You’ll need something flashier, though. She won’t show herself to just anyone.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Are you telling me we’re going shopping?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” I smirked, already imagining how she’d react to the ordeal.

The boutique was one of those places that smelled like perfume and money, where everything was overpriced but worth it. Mirella walked in like she owned the place, and I followed, grinning at how easily she commanded the room.

“You’re enjoying this too much,” she muttered as a saleswoman fluttered around her, holding up dresses like offerings to a queen.

“I live for moments like this,” I teased, leaning against a rack of suits. “The great Mirella, out of her element.”

She grabbed a sequined dress from the rack and held it up, glaring at me over the fabric. “You think I’m out of my element? Watch and learn, Sergio.”

What followed was a whirlwind of fabric, color, and Mirella’s sharp wit. Every dress she tried on seemed designed to drive me insane. There was one in particular, a black number with a plunging neckline, that nearly had me forgetting how to breathe.

“What do you think?” she asked, spinning in front of the mirror.

I couldn’t speak for a moment. My throat was dry, and my brain was working overtime to keep my thoughts PG. “It’s... fine.”

She smirked, clearly seeing through me. “Just fine?”

“Don’t push it,” I teased, turning away before I gave myself away completely.

By the time we left, she was carrying several bags, and I was down a ridiculous amount of money. Not that I cared. The way she laughed as we walked back to the car was worth every penny.

Back at the hotel, I walked her to her room, carrying the bags like some kind of overpaid chauffeur. She unlocked the door, and as she turned to thank me, something shifted in the air. The playful banter we'd shared earlier faded, replaced by something heavier.

Her eyes met mine, and for a moment, neither of us moved. My gaze dropped to her lips, and before I could stop myself, I leaned in, dropping the bag at the doorstep. I wanted to fight with everything in me, but I couldn't. The pull was stronger than my resistance.

The moment our mouths touched, it was like a dam breaking. Her lips were soft and warm and tasted faintly of the coffee she'd sipped earlier, but I could still taste the cherries in them. She always tasted like cherries. I pressed closer, my hand finding the curve of her waist. She didn't pull away. Instead, her arms looped around my neck, pulling me closer.

Her lips lingered on mine. I pulled her tongue with mine playfully but enough to deepen it, turning urgent. My heart raced as her fingers tangled in my hair, and I lost myself in her completely. Her scent, her touch—it was intoxicating, like nothing I'd ever felt before. Every part of me screamed to take this further, to forget about the world outside and just stay here with her.

But then reality slammed back into me. Mirella wasn't mine. Not really. She was supposed to marry my father, and no matter how much I hated that, it was the truth.

I pulled back, my breathing heavy. Her lips were slightly swollen, her cheeks flushed, and she looked at me with a mixture of confusion and longing that nearly broke me.

“We shouldn’t...” I began, though the words felt like a lie.

She nodded, though she didn’t look convinced. “I know.”

I stepped back, putting space between us before I did something I couldn’t take back.
“Get dressed. I’ll come back for you in twenty minutes.”

And then I left, shutting the door behind me before I could change my mind.

MIRELLA

The room was quiet after Sergio left, but my heart wasn't. It was pounding so loudly I was sure the entire floor could hear it. I stared at the closed door for a moment, trying to get my thoughts in order, but they refused to settle.

The truth was, if Sergio had wanted to go further, I wouldn't have stopped him. No, I wanted him as much as he wanted me, maybe more. That kiss left me feeling like I was on fire, and the idea of extinguishing it now felt impossible. But I wasn't just Mirella. I was Raven, too, and Raven didn't lose control.

Still, being in this town again stirred something in me, something I hadn't felt in years. It was the same place I'd come to when I thought my father had died. And when the father of my child died right in front of me, I relocated here to bury my grief and figure out my life.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the photos I kept hidden. One caught my eye—a picture of a little restaurant with blue shutters and a cozy courtyard. My dad used to take me there when I was a kid. I smiled at the memory of his booming laugh as he told me silly stories over bowls of pasta too big for me to finish. After his “death,” I started going there every Saturday, alone, as a way to feel close to him. It became a ritual, a place to breathe. Over time, it became my sanctuary.

Back then, I wasn't Raven yet. I was just Mirella—broken, lost, and trying to survive. The town embraced me in ways I didn't expect. It gave me Enzo and Dahlia, the two people who became my family.

I first met Enzo in the middle of a rainstorm. I was standing outside a market, soaked to the bone and cursing myself for not checking the weather. My car had broken down, and I was stuck with a bag of groceries and no plan. Enzo pulled up in an old truck, leaning out the window with an umbrella in one hand and a grin that could rival the sun.

“Need a ride, Bella?” His voice was warm, teasing.

I hesitated. “You could be a serial killer for all I know.”

“Do I look like a serial killer?” He held up the umbrella as if it was proof of his good intentions.

“To be fair, they usually don’t advertise it,” I shot back, but I was already walking toward the truck.

The ride was short, but by the time he dropped me off, we’d covered everything from the best pizza in town to why he thought pineapple didn’t belong on it. He handed me a business card before driving off, saying, “If you ever need anything, call me.”

A week later, I did. And that was the beginning of our partnership.

Dahlia came a few months later. I was at the restaurant one Saturday, sitting in my usual corner with a book, when a young woman in a bright red dress burst in, looking like she was about to cry. The waiter tried to tell her the place was fully booked, but I waved him over and told him to let her sit with me.

She hesitated, her eyes darting between me and the empty chair. “Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude.”

“I could use the company,” I said, and it wasn’t a lie.

She sat down, and we ended up talking for hours. She told me about her messy breakup, her dreams of opening a bakery, and how she felt like she didn't belong anywhere. I told her a little about myself—just enough to let her know she wasn't alone.

By the time we finished dessert, I'd offered her a job as my assistant. "You're crazy," she said, laughing, but she took the job anyway.

Now, years later, I was still here, and so were they. My phone buzzed, pulling me back to the present. I glanced at the screen—Enzo. I had sent him a message earlier.

"Let me guess," he said the second I answered. "You want something."

"I need you to book out the restaurant for tonight," I said, already anticipating his objections.

"Why? What are you up to?"

"I'm going. Not as Mirella. As Raven."

There was a pause, followed by a sharp intake of breath. "Are you out of your mind? That's a terrible idea."

"I know what I'm doing, Enzo."

"No, you don't," he snapped. "You're walking into a trap, and for what? Nostalgia?"

"It's not just nostalgia," I responded, my voice firm. "That place... it's important to me. And if I'm going to face whatever's coming, I need to do it as Raven. Not hiding. Not pretending to be a ghost."

“Mirella,” his tone softened, but the worry was still there. “This isn’t just about you anymore. Think about what’s at stake.”

“I am,” I said, though a part of me knew he was right. “But I need this. Trust me.”

There was a long silence before he sighed. “Fine. But if this goes south, don’t expect me to bail you out.”

I smiled despite myself. “You always bail me out.”

“Yeah, well, one of these days, you’re going to owe me more than I can collect.”

We hung up, and I leaned back in my chair, letting out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. This wasn’t just about the restaurant or the memories tied to it. It was about reclaiming a part of myself I’d buried too deep.

The knock on the door pulled me from my thoughts. For a moment, I considered pretending I wasn’t there, but Sergio wasn’t the type to just leave. Another knock, firmer this time, followed by his voice.

“It’s time, Mirella.”

I sighed, dragging myself to the door. When I opened it, Sergio’s face shifted, softening as if he were reading my hesitation before I could speak.

“I’m not going,” I muttered, arms crossed to hide how uneasy I felt. “I’d rather stay here. Alone.”

His eyebrows pulled together, confusion and maybe a hint of hurt crossing his face. “Is this about the kiss?” His voice lowered just enough to make my chest tighten. “Because if it is, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not—”

He cut me off. “I shouldn’t have kissed you. I just...” He paused, running a hand through his hair. “I find it difficult to stay away from you. But if you want me to, I will.”

I wasn’t expecting that. Part of me wanted to laugh at how serious he looked, but the other part—the part that wasn’t quite ready to face him—felt a pang of guilt.

“It’s not about the kiss, Sergio,” I said, softening my tone. “I just... I need some space. That’s all.”

“Space,” he repeated, almost like he didn’t believe me. “From me or from all of this?”

I hesitated. “From everything.”

He studied me for a moment, his jaw tight like he wanted to argue but was holding back. “Fine,” he finally said, stepping back. “If that’s what you want, I’ll give you space. But just know I’m not going far.”

I watched him walk away, his shoulders tense. The door clicked shut, and I leaned against it, exhaling slowly. I wasn’t sure if I was more relieved or disappointed. Maybe both.

But there was no time to dwell on it. If I wasn’t going with Sergio, I was still going. Alone.

I thought about what Enzo had said about the risks and the stakes. He wasn’t wrong. But he also didn’t understand what that restaurant meant to me, what it meant to show Don Carlos that Raven wasn’t scared of him. He might think Mirella is, but not

Raven. It wasn't just a place to prove a point. It was a reminder of who I was before the world broke me and who I could be again.

The dress I chose was sleek and midnight black, fitting like a second skin. It wasn't just clothing; it was armor. The fabric shimmered faintly under the light, a subtle touch that made me feel like a ghost slipping through the night. Over it, I draped a long cloak with a hood that shadowed my face.

Then came the mask. It was delicate, covering my entire face with black feathers fanning out at the edges. Hidden within it was a voice modulator, something I had Dahlia's friend design for me years ago. When I spoke, it would deepen and distort my voice, giving Raven her signature sound—low, smooth, and slightly menacing.

Finally, the hat. It was wide-brimmed with a veil of black netting that fell just over my mask, adding another layer of mystery. When I caught my reflection in the mirror, I hardly recognized myself. The woman staring back wasn't Mirella. She was someone else entirely.

Raven.

I pulled the hood over my head and felt a familiar rush of power. Mirella might have been unsure, hesitant. But Raven? She didn't hesitate. She acted. And tonight, she had a purpose.

The cool night air greeted me as I slipped out of the room. The halls were quiet, with the kind of silence that made every step feel louder than it was. I avoided the main exits, taking the side stairs that led to a back door. It wasn't my first time sneaking out, and it wouldn't be the last.

Outside, the shadows stretched long, and I moved between them like I belonged there. In some ways, I did. The streets of this town had seen me at my lowest, and

now they would see me at my strongest.

I reached the car Enzo had sent for me. The driver didn't ask questions or even glance at me as I slipped into the backseat. That was the beauty of being Raven. People didn't want to know who you were. They just wanted to stay out of your way.

As the car rolled through the streets, I thought about Sergio again. The way his lips lingered on mine, the way his hands had gripped my waist like he was afraid I'd disappear. He was trying to figure me out, trying to reach the parts of me I wasn't ready to show him. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

But then, I thought about the way he'd looked at me when I told him I needed space like he was willing to step back even though it hurt him. That kind of restraint wasn't easy, not for someone like Sergio.

The car came to a stop outside the restaurant. My restaurant. The one I'd been coming to for years, hiding in plain sight. I adjusted my mask, pulling the veil down to ensure my face was hidden.

Tonight wasn't about memories or sentimentality. It wasn't even about Sergio or his father.

It was about me. Raven.

I stepped out of the car, my cloak billowing slightly in the breeze, and headed for the door. Enzo had done as I asked. The restaurant was dark, save for the warm glow of candles in the windows. Empty, just the way I liked it.

I pushed the door open, and the familiar scent of garlic and fresh bread washed over me. For a moment, I was just Mirella again, a little girl sitting at a table with her father, laughing over stories that didn't matter.

But that was a long time ago.

Now, I was someone else entirely.

SERGIO

The idea of leaving Mirella behind didn't sit well with me. I hated it. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted us to talk through our feelings, but that wasn't what she wanted. She'd asked for space, and I had given it to her, but every instinct in me told me to stay. The hotel was secure, and I trusted the staff, but I trusted Ryan more.

"Ryan, I need you to stay here," I said, watching as his jaw tightened.

Ryan crossed his arms. "You sure about this? I'd rather be out there, covering your back."

"I'm sure. I am just going to stake out the restaurant today. Then, we can come back and strategize. I need to know who I am dealing with first," I explained firmly. "Ryan, please. She's important to me, Ryan. If anything happens to her..."

He nodded before I could finish, his expression softening. "Got it. I'll stay. But you owe me."

I smirked. "Add it to the tab."

I walked out of the hotel and into the waiting car. I couldn't shake the nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach. Mirella would be safe here. She had to be.

The restaurant was exactly as I'd expected—quiet, dark, and radiating exclusivity. If Raven wanted to make an impression, she was doing a damn good job. My instincts told me to keep a low profile, so I parked down the street and waited, watching the

entrance.

The minutes dragged. Nothing happened. No one came or went. It was like the place was frozen in time.

I was about to call it a night when a shadow moved near the back entrance. A tall man dressed in black walked straight toward my car and stopped just short of the passenger window. I rolled it down, keeping my hand close to the gun at my side.

“The Raven wishes to have lunch with you,” he said, his tone neutral.

I raised an eyebrow. “Lunch? You sure about that?”

“She’s waiting inside.”

The man didn’t offer any more information, and I wasn’t in the mood to ask questions. This could easily be an ambush, but turning it down wasn’t an option. Not if I wanted answers, not when I wanted to get the shipments back.

I got out of the car and followed him toward the entrance, keeping my steps slow and deliberate. My mind was racing, running through every possible scenario. Would she be alone? Armed? Was this a trap?

The interior of the restaurant was elegant but understated. Candlelight flickered on each table, casting soft shadows against the walls. The place was empty, save for one figure sitting in the corner.

She was hard to miss. Dressed entirely in black, she wore a mask that covered her face completely, with detailed designs etched into the material. The mask didn’t even reveal her eyes, but it was the voice that threw me.

“Mr. Sergio, I appreciate your punctuality, even though I never got a memo about a meeting,” she said, her voice smooth but mechanical, altered just enough to make it unrecognizable.

I pulled out the chair across from her and sat down, my eyes narrowing. “I aim to please.”

There was a pause before she spoke again. “Pleasing me wasn’t part of the game, but I appreciate the effort.”

I couldn’t help the smirk that tugged at my lips. “Charming. Do you always hide behind masks and voice changers, or am I just lucky?”

Her posture didn’t shift, but I could feel the weight of her gaze through the mask. “Caution isn’t the same as hiding, Mr. Sergio. Surely, a man like you understands that.”

“Caution,” I repeated, leaning back in my chair. “And here I thought this was just lunch.”

“It is,” she said, gesturing toward the empty table. “Though I find conversation far more satisfying than food.”

“Good,” I said. “Because I’m not hungry.”

She tilted her head slightly, and I wondered if I’d hit a nerve. “Then let’s skip the small talk,” she said, her voice steady. “Why are you here?”

I shrugged, keeping my expression neutral. “Curiosity. Plus, you stole my shipment, that wasn’t nice.

“Stole?” she scoffed, “That is such a huge accusation. I hope you have proof to back up your boldness.”

“You’re not exactly subtle, Raven. People talk.”

“People talk about you too, Mr. Sergio. But I doubt you lose sleep over it.”

She had a point, but I wasn’t about to admit it. “Fair enough. So, what’s the real reason you invited me here? If you wanted me dead, I’d be dead. And if you wanted to negotiate, you wouldn’t need all this.” I gestured toward her mask.

“Perhaps I simply enjoy the company,” she said, her tone light but unreadable.

“Do you?” I asked, leaning forward slightly. “Because I can’t tell if you’re flirting or plotting.”

“Maybe both,” she teased without missing a beat.

I chuckled, shaking my head. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“So, they tell me,” she said. “But we’re not here to exchange compliments, are we?”

“No,” I admitted, my tone turning serious. “We’re not. Let’s cut to the chase. What do you want, and is there a world where we come to terms, and you hand over my shipment to me, or do I have to ambush you too?”

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she leaned back in her chair, her gloved fingers steepling in front of her. The silence stretched, and I forced myself to stay still, to not react.

When she finally spoke, her voice was calm but deliberate. “What I want, Mr. Sergio,

is control. The kind of control your father has taken from too many people. The kind of control I'm willing to fight for."

I didn't flinch, though her words hit harder than I expected. "And you think you'll get that by meeting with me or by stealing our shipment?"

"Perhaps," she said. "Or perhaps I just wanted to see the man behind the reputation."

"And?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You're not what I expected," she said simply.

"Good or bad?"

"Both,"

I couldn't help but laugh. "You're full of surprises, Raven."

"So are you," she whispered.

Her voice, distorted as it was, still carried a strange kind of confidence. It wasn't just the mask or the words she chose. It was the way she carried herself and the way she controlled the room without lifting a finger.

I watched her. Something about her felt familiar, though I couldn't quite place it. The way she tilted her head, the way her gloved fingers tapped softly against the table—it was like I'd seen it all before.

"You know," I said, leaning forward again, "for someone who likes control, you're giving me very little to work with here."

“Am I?” she asked, her tone almost amused.

“Yeah,” I said. “And I don’t think that voice is yours, either.”

For the first time, she hesitated, just for a fraction of a second. It was subtle, but it was there.

“What makes you think that?” she asked.

I smiled, letting the silence hang for a moment before answering. “Call it a hunch.”

She didn’t respond right away, but I could tell I’d hit a nerve. Whatever game she was playing, I wasn’t going to let her win that easily.

The longer I sat across from her, the more I felt like I was being drawn into something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. This wasn’t what I expected. The Raven was supposed to be ruthless and calculating—a shadow in the night. Instead, here she was, speaking with a calm, refined elegance that felt out of place in a world filled with gunfire and betrayal.

And yet, it wasn’t out of place at all. It was striking. She was striking.

“Let’s talk about the shipment,” I said, leaning forward, my fingers drumming lightly on the edge of the table. “Why take it? You know that’s a declaration of war.”

She tilted her head slightly, like she was weighing her response. The way she moved was deliberate, almost theatrical. Every gesture, every pause, felt calculated, yet it wasn’t cold. It was fascinating.

“It’s not personal,” she said finally, her voice smooth and even. “It’s just business.”

“That’s the cliché answer,” I countered. “Come on, give me something better. Humor me.”

Her fingers tapped lightly against the table, a subtle rhythm that matched the calmness in her voice. “You’re a smart man, Mr. Sergio. Surely, you’ve learned by now that in business, emotion is a liability.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “You’re dodging the question.”

“Am I?” she said, a hint of amusement in her tone.

“Yeah, you are.”

She leaned back slightly, and for a moment, the flicker of a candle caught the edge of her mask. The designs on it shimmered faintly, giving her an almost ethereal quality.

“Can I ask you a question?” she said suddenly.

It caught me off guard. I wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of curiosity. “A question?”

“Yes,” she said, tilting her head again. “Unless you’re afraid of answering.”

I laughed softly. “All right, ask away.”

“If you were given a chance to be someone else—someone other than the son of a ruthless Mafia family—who would you be?”

I blinked, taken aback. It wasn’t the kind of question I expected from her. Hell, it wasn’t the kind of question I expected from anyone.

“Who would I be?” I repeated, stalling for time.

“Yes,” she said, her voice steady. “If you could strip away the title, the power, the violence, who are you underneath it all?”

I leaned back in my chair, folding my arms across my chest. It was a simple question on the surface, but the weight of it was heavy. Who would I be? I hadn’t thought about that in years.

“Maybe a firefighter,” I said after a moment.

Her head tilted again, a motion that was quickly becoming familiar. “A firefighter?”

“Yeah,” I said, meeting her gaze—or at least where I imagined her gaze to be behind that mask. “I’ve always been fascinated by the idea of rescuing people. Running into danger when everyone else is running out.”

She was quiet for a moment, and I wondered if I’d said something ridiculous. Then, she spoke, her voice carrying a note of genuine admiration. “How noble.”

I laughed softly. “Noble? I’m not sure about that.”

“Rescuing people in danger,” she said. “It’s a selfless ambition. Rare in a world like ours.”

“Fair enough,” I responded, leaning forward again. “What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. If you weren’t The Raven, who would you be?”

Her gloved hands stilled, and for the first time, I felt like I'd caught her off guard. It was subtle, barely noticeable, but it was there.

"There was a time," she began slowly, "when I wasn't The Raven."

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "What were you then?"

"Lost," she replied simply. "But someone once asked me who I would rather be. And so, I became what I would rather be."

Her words hung in the air, heavy with meaning. I studied her, trying to piece together the puzzle she was offering me.

"And now?" I asked. "Is this who you want to be?"

Her posture didn't change, but there was a quiet strength in her silence. It wasn't a refusal to answer—it was an answer in itself.

"You're something else," I broke the silence after a moment. "I don't meet many people who can make me question things. You've got a talent for it."

"Thank you," she responded, her tone polite but not dismissive.

The conversation could have ended there, but I wasn't ready to let it. There was something about her—something I couldn't quite place but didn't want to let go of.

"Can I ask you one more thing?"

"That depends," her voice laced with a playful tease, a hint of amusement in her voice. "Will you ask politely?"

I smirked. “If I must.”

She gestured lightly with her hand as if to say, go on .

I leaned forward, my voice dropping slightly. “Show me the face behind the mask.”

For the first time, her poise faltered—just for a split second. It was so unpretentious that most people wouldn’t have noticed. But I did.

“Why?” she asked, her voice still altered but carrying an edge of curiosity.

“Because I want to know who The Raven really is.”

MIRELLA

“Because I want to know who The Raven really is,”

Raven. I wasn’t the girl who ran away, who left behind heartbreak and questions she didn’t know how to answer.

The question is who really is The Raven?

Sergio stared at me across the room, his eyes searching for something he’d never find unless I wanted him to.

“You asked to see who I really am,” I began, my voice calm but deliberate. “I can’t show you my face. I can’t risk that. But I can show you pieces of me.”

His brow furrowed, and his lips pressed into a thin line, but he nodded. “I’ll take what you’ll give.”

That was Sergio—unrelenting but patient in a way that disarmed me every time.

I led him out of the restaurant and onto the quiet streets of Montclair. The town wasn’t busy. It was quiet, too quiet. I almost changed my mind, but I navigated the shadows, guiding him away from prying eyes. He didn’t ask where we were going, but I could feel his curiosity building.

We stopped at a secluded overlook, the kind of spot that felt like a secret even though it wasn’t. The lights stretched out before us, glittering like stars trapped in a web of

steel and concrete.

“This was one of the first places I came to when I left my hometown,” I said, keeping my words measured.

Sergio stepped closer, his gaze flickering between me and the view. “Why here?”

“It reminded me of something I lost,” I answered. “And something I wanted to find again.”

I didn’t elaborate, and he didn’t press me. Instead, he leaned on the railing, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the glow of the skyline. He didn’t realize how much he stood out—how his very presence demanded attention even when he tried to blend into the background.

“I come here to remember who I was,” I added. “And to remind myself of who I need to be.”

He looked at me then, his eyes softening in a way that made my stomach flip. “That’s a hell of a thing to say.”

I shrugged, turning away before his gaze unraveled me completely. “It’s the truth.”

We didn’t linger long. The night had more to show him—or rather, I had more to show him.

The bar was tucked away in an alley, the kind of place only locals knew about. Inside, the atmosphere was warm and inviting, filled with the sound of low chatter and soft jazz. I chose a corner booth, and Sergio slid in across from me.

“You don’t seem like the type to drink,” he winced, his voice almost teasing and

complimenting me at the same time. He was eyeing me curiously as I ordered a sparkling water.

“You’d be right,” I responded casually, watching the waiter place his whiskey on the table. “But I don’t judge those who do.”

He took a sip, his eyes never leaving mine. “You’re full of surprises.”

The corner of my lips tugged upward. “You have said that already tonight, but I must confess, so are you.” I didn’t know why, but I felt more comfortable talking to Sergio as The Raven than as plain old Mirella. Maybe because talking to him as The Raven revealed a part of me he didn’t know, yet he accepted.

He chuckled, the sound deep and genuine. “How’s that?”

“You’re not what I expected,” I admitted. I didn’t expect him to be this comfortable around The Raven. Considering she is supposed to be an enemy who stole his shipment.

“And what did you expect?”

“Someone colder. More ruthless.”

He leaned back, swirling his drink. “I can be when I need to.”

“I’m sure you can,” I replied, tilting my head. “But that’s not all there is to you, is it? There is something deeper,” I paused for a split second before adding. “Or someone.”

His smile faded, replaced by something more serious. “No. It’s not.”

I watched him closely, waiting for him to say more. And then he did.

“There’s someone,” he began, his voice quieter now. “Someone who gets under my skin in ways I don’t know how to describe.”

My chest tightened, but I kept my expression neutral. “Go on.”

“She’s complicated,” he continued, his eyes staring into the amber liquid in his glass. “Stubborn and frustrating as hell. But she’s also brilliant and kind in ways she doesn’t even realize.”

My fingers curled against the edge of the table, hidden beneath the black gloves. I knew he was talking about me, Mirella.

“She has this way of making everything else fade away,” he said, his voice growing softer. “When I’m with her, nothing else matters. Not the business, not the danger, nothing.”

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. “She sounds remarkable.”

“She is,” he declared, looking up at me with an intensity that made it hard to breathe. “But it doesn’t matter. I don’t think she feels the same way.”

The sincerity in his voice cut through me like a blade. For a moment, I forgot I was wearing a mask. I forgot that he didn’t know it was me sitting across from him.

“Does she know how you feel?” I asked, my voice steadier than I felt.

“It’s complicated,” he replied in a low tone, running a hand through his hair.

I leaned forward slightly, my voice softening. “Don’t let it be.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “What do you mean?”

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “Sometimes, we hold back because we’re afraid of what might happen if we’re honest. But if you care about her as much as you say, don’t waste time. Tell her. Show her.”

I don’t know why I would say such a thing knowing how it would fuck my life up if he told me, but right now, I was speaking from the heart.

He studied me for a long moment, and I wondered if he could hear the truth in my words.

“You’re good at this,” he said finally, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Giving advice.”

“I’ve had practice,” I said, leaning back.

His smile grew, and he set his glass down. “This was nice. Unexpected, but nice.”

I nodded, feeling a crick of disappointment as he stood. I wanted to keep talking to him as Raven. I didn’t want to go back to being Mirella and hiding this part of me from him.

“I need to go,” he said, his tone apologetic but firm.

I knew where he was going—back to Mirella. Back to me.

“It was nice. I know the next time we see each other, it might not be this peaceful, but for what it is worth, it is just business,” he added. I could hear sincerity in his voice as he stood up and gave me a curt nod.

“Safe travels,” my voice was barely above a whisper, watching as he walked away.

The moment he was out of sight, I slipped out through the back entrance. If he was going to beat me to the hotel, he'd have to try hard. I know every short route in this town, and there was no way he would beat me back to the hotel.

The door to my hotel room felt more solemn than usual. I leaned against it, trying to steady my breath. I had barely made it to my room and changed hurriedly before I heard footsteps.

I knew who was on the other side. I knew because I felt him before I even opened the door. Sergio.

Part of me didn't want to answer. The other part? It ached. It ached for the way he looked at me, the way he made me feel like the Mirella I'd buried so long ago.

The moment I opened the door, it seemed to spark with colors in my heart, igniting the part of me that I had tried to hide. I could feel it on my skin. Sergio stood there, his eyes, dark and full of something between longing and restraint, met mine. For a moment, neither of us spoke.

His shirt was slightly untucked, and his hair was disheveled in that effortlessly charming way. His gaze pinned me, making my breath catch.

I was painfully aware of my slightly rumpled shirt. The top button was undone, revealing just a hint of skin. His eyes lingered there for a moment before flicking back to mine. It was subtle, but I saw it. Felt it.

"Mirella," he finally spoke in a hoarse tone, my name soft and low on his lips. My pulse quickened.

“Hi,” I managed, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Damn it.” The words escaped him like he’d lost some internal battle, and before I could process it, his hand was on my waist, pushing me inside.

The door shut behind us, and in the next moment, his lips were on mine. It was soft at first, almost uncertain, but when I didn’t pull away, his tongue was encircling mine, claiming me in the most breathtaking way possible. It was electrifying, exhilarating, and thrilling as his mouth familiarized with every detail of mine.

Every nerve in my body seemed to wake up under his touch.

His hands were on my waist, pulling me closer until there wasn’t an inch of space left between us. I let out a small gasp as his lips moved against mine, his breath warm and intoxicating.

The tension that had been simmering between us boiled over.

My hands slid up his chest, my fingers tracing the hard lines of his muscles. He groaned a low sound that made my knees weak, and I clung to him, needing his strength to hold me up.

He tilted his head, deepening the kiss, his hands roaming over the small of my back, grazing the bare skin where my top had ridden up. It sent shivers down my spine, and I couldn’t help the soft moan that escaped me.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me, Mirella?” he murmured against my lips, his voice husky and full of need.

“Sergio,” I whispered, barely able to think past the feeling of his hands on my hips and his lips trailing down my neck, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. His hands

cupped my breasts, and I buckled under his touch.

I pressed against him, feeling his heartbeat pounding in rhythm with mine. Every kiss, every touch, felt like a dam breaking. We moved together as if we were the only two people in the world. The rest of it didn't matter.

But then, my phone buzzed. A sharp, jarring noise that snapped me back to reality. It was a phone call that I didn't want to check because I wanted to stay in the moment.

Sergio gazed at me, tilting his head to kiss me when my phone buzzed again.

Shit!

We froze, breathless and tangled, as the sound broke through the haze. It was my phone again, and immediately I knew I had to check this time. I reached for it reluctantly, my hands trembling as I checked my phone. There was a missed call from Dahlia followed by a message.

Alex is running a fever, taking him to the hospital, the message read. It was sent multiple times from Dahlia. I gripped the phone tightly, panic rushing through me like cold water.

"Mirella?" Sergio's voice pulled me back, his concern evident.

I forced a shaky smile, "It's nothing," I said quickly. "Just an emergency I need to handle."

He frowned, stepping closer. "At this hour? What's going on?"

"It's personal," I responded. My voice was sharper than I intended. But I was trying to hide the storm brewing inside me. His expression softened, but the concern in his

eyes remained.

“Let me help,” he offered, reaching out as if to steady me.

I shook my head and moved away from his reach. “No. I’ve got it under control.”

He sighed, frustration flickering across his face.

I bit my lip, guilt munching at me as I grabbed a jacket and shoes. “I just need to take care of this.”

He didn’t say anything as I slipped past him, but I could feel his eyes on me, full of questions I wasn’t ready to answer. As I walked down the hall, my chest ached. I hated lying to him, but I needed to be anywhere but here right now.

But Alex needed me, and right now, that was the only thing that mattered.

MIRELLA

The phone buzzed in my hand, the message glaring up at me like a neon sign in the dark. Dahlia's words were short and to the point: Alex isn't well. Fever spiked. He's at the hospital.

She sent it again when I did not respond.

I am on my way. I simply responded.

My heart twisted. Alex. My baby boy. My everything. The words felt like nails hammered into my chest.

I stood there in the hallway, shadows playing on the walls as my mind raced. How could I get back fast enough? Sergio had driven me here, so I had no car to drive back. The rentals Enzo had arranged only do local trips. The flight alone would take hours, and hiring a private jet would raise too many questions. I could call my men—Raven's men. They'd get me there in record time, but that meant exposing myself. The mask would slip, and once it did, there was no going back.

"Fuck it," I muttered, thumbing through my phone's contacts. I hesitated over the encrypted number. One call, one command, and I'd be in the air before anyone could blink. A risk I was willing to take for my son.

But then, a deep voice interrupted my thoughts. "Whatever's going on, I'm here."

I turned sharply. Sergio stood at the bottom of the staircase, his hands tucked into the

pockets of his coat. He wasn't supposed to be there. He wasn't supposed to see me like this—vulnerable and panicked.

His gaze softened as he stepped closer. "You look like the world just dropped on your shoulders."

It had. I could barely breathe under the weight of it. "I need a ride back to New York," I blurted out. "Now."

He didn't ask where, why, or what was going on. Sergio wasn't like that. Instead, he gave a single nod. "Let's go."

We didn't say much as we got into his car. The sleek black interior hummed with the engine's low purr as we sped down the empty streets. My mind was a whirlwind. The glow of the city blurred past, but all I could see was Alex's face—his sleepy, beautiful eyes, his shy smile, his tiny hands always reaching for mine.

Sergio's voice broke through my thoughts. "Where are we going?"

"We're not going home. Saint Memorial Hospital first." I responded.

"It didn't seem like a home emergency. I just asked to be sure." He paused and gave me a half, concerning smile. "You're pale," he added, glancing at me briefly before focusing back on the road. "Whatever this is, it's serious."

For a moment, I wanted to fight him on it. But he was right. Alex came first. Always.

When we pulled up to the hospital, I didn't wait for Sergio to park properly. I was out of the car and through the glass doors before he'd even killed the engine. The pediatric ward smelled like antiseptic and tears, the drone of fluorescent lights adding to the sterile atmosphere.

Dahlia met me halfway, her face a mask of worry. “He’s stable,” she assured me quickly, but her tone wasn’t enough to erase my fear. “The doctor’s with him now.”

I nodded and rushed past her. The sight of Alex lying in that hospital bed nearly broke me. He looked so small, his skin pale against the crisp white sheets.

“Mommy’s here,” I whispered in his ear, scooping him up into my arms. His tiny body fit against me like a missing puzzle piece, his head resting on my shoulder.

“Mommy,” Alex said in a faint voice, almost inaudible, but I heard it. It pained me to see him in such a state and not be able to do anything about it.

I could feel Sergio’s eyes on me when he walked into the room moments later, watching from the doorway like a silent shadow. I didn’t care. My world narrowed to Alex, the rise and fall of his chest, the warmth of his little hands.

The doctor had a clipboard in hand, his face calm but serious. “It’s nothing to worry about,” he explained. “Just a reaction to the change in weather. It’s common among kids his age.”

Common? There was nothing common about the way my heart clenched in fear. But I nodded, thanking him before kissing Alex’s forehead.

When I turned back, Sergio was still there, leaning against the wall. His face was unreadable, but there was something in his eyes—something unspoken but heavy.

“Is he your kid?” The question came out quiet, almost hesitant. His voice was shaking just enough for me to notice.

I froze. The words hung between us like a blade suspended by a thread. My mind scrambled for an answer, a way to keep the truth buried. I couldn’t risk exposing Alex

to this part of my world. I didn't want anyone to know about him just yet, considering the double life I was living as Mirella and Raven.

I pulled him aside, lowering my voice so Alex wouldn't hear. "He's not mine," I lied, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. "He's Dahlia's, my assistant's son. But he's like family to me."

Sergio's expression softened, but I could tell he wasn't entirely convinced. Still, he didn't push me. Instead, he glanced back at Alex, his gaze lingering.

The next thing I knew, he was by Alex's bedside, crouching down so their eyes were level. "Hey, buddy," he said, his voice warm and inviting. "You gave us all a scare, huh?"

Alex, usually shy and reserved around strangers, surprised me by smiling faintly. "I'm okay now."

"Good," Sergio said, ruffling Alex's hair lightly. "You've got to stay strong, kid. You've got a lot of people who care about you."

I stood there, watching the two of them interact, and my chest tightened for an entirely different reason. Alex didn't warm up to people easily. He was cautious and quiet—just like me. But with Sergio, it was as if a wall had come down.

Sergio stayed by Alex's side, talking to him about everything and nothing—his favorite animals, the toys he liked, and whether he thought dinosaurs could beat robots in a fight. Alex giggled at that one. The sound was light and infectious.

"Dinosaurs," Alex declared. "They're stronger."

Sergio grinned. "Smart kid."

I watched them, my heart aching in a way I couldn't quite describe. There was something natural about the way they bonded as if they'd known each other forever.

Alex yawned, his eyelids drooping, and I knew he'd fall asleep soon. I stepped closer, placing a hand on Sergio's shoulder. "Thank you," I murmured.

He looked up at me, something unreadable flickering in his eyes. "For what?"

"For this. For being here."

He didn't respond, but the look he gave me said enough.

When Alex finally drifted off, Sergio and I stepped out into the hallway. The atmosphere was filled with words we didn't want to say and actions we dared not express. The silence was almost suffocating.

"You're good with kids," I said, breaking the quiet.

"They're easier to understand than adults," he replied, a small smile playing on his lips.

I wanted to say more, to explain the bond he and Alex had shared so effortlessly, but the words stuck in my throat.

Instead, I simply walked beside him. I couldn't shake the feeling that the lies I'd told tonight would catch up to me sooner or later. But for now, Alex was safe, safe from my world, and I intended to keep it that way for as long as I could.

Walking into Don Carlos's office always felt like walking into a lion's den. Today

was no different. The air was different, considering the stunt I pulled. I knew there were going to be consequences, and the way his dark eyes fixed on me as I entered sent an immediate chill down my spine.

The door clicked shut behind me, and I stood straight, refusing to let him see the anxiety simmering beneath the surface.

“You’ve wasted enough of my time, Mirella,” he barked, gesturing for me to sit. I didn’t move. “Care to explain why your little trip was cut short?”

I kept my voice even. “My assistant had a family emergency. I needed to make sure everything was handled.”

His laugh was harsh, sharp. “You abandoned the mission because of some assistant? Do you think this is a charity, Mirella?”

“I am....” I tried to explain before he chimed in.

“You have some nerve,” he said, his tone cold and cutting.

I stood my ground, clasping my hands together to keep them from shaking. “I apologize for cutting the trip short, but it was unavoidable. My assistant—”

“Had a family emergency. Yes, I heard.” He leaned back in his chair, exhaling a plume of smoke. “Do you think I give any fuck about your assistant’s personal problems?”

I clenched my jaw, keeping my voice calm. “It wasn’t my intention to cause any issues—”

“Save it,” he interrupted, waving his hand dismissively. “I don’t expect much from

you, Mirella. You're a woman, after all. This," he gestured around the room, "isn't your world. It never will be."

The dismissal stung, but I didn't let it touch my face. He leaned back, eyeing me like a predator watching prey.

"Our engagement is coming up this weekend," he said, his tone shifting to something mockingly sweet. "You won't pull any stunts like last time, will you?"

I forced a smile. "Of course not."

"You better not," he warned, his voice dropping to a growl. "Or I'll make sure you regret it."

The weight of his words hung in the air, but I didn't respond. Anything I said would only fuel his fire.

He studied me for a moment longer before leaning forward, his fingers steepled. "There's something else."

I froze. Was this it? Had he figured me out?

"Your father," he said, watching me closely. "Did he ever mention a safe?"

I frowned, feigning confusion. "A safe?"

"Yes, a safe." His tone was sharp and clipped. "It's not just any safe, Mirella. It holds things—important things. Did he ever speak to you about it?"

I shook my head, my expression carefully neutral. "No. He never mentioned anything like that."

Don Carlos leaned back, his gaze narrowing as if he could see right through me. “If you’re lying to me, Mirella...”

“I’m not,” I said quickly, my voice steady. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

For a moment, the room was silent, the tension thick enough to cut. Then he waved a dismissive hand.

“Get out,” he snarled at me. “I’ve wasted enough time on you.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I turned and walked out, keeping my head high even as my heart raced.

Once I was safely out of his office, my mind began to race. A safe. Of course. It all made sense now.

I pieced it together as I made my way back to my house, each detail clicking into place like pieces of a puzzle. My father had always been meticulous and careful. He’d kept records—names, assets, deals. I’d overheard him talk about it once, back when I was a teenager.

He’d called it insurance.

And now I knew why Don Carlos was keeping him alive. The safe wasn’t just a collection of secrets—it was power. It held everything. Names of top criminals, assets worth more than I could imagine, and records of every shady deal Don Carlos had ever been a part of. And if that weren’t enough, it apparently held keys and access codes to things far more dangerous: nuclear weapons, bombs, AI systems.

If Don Carlos got his hands on that safe, he wouldn’t just be powerful. He’d be unstoppable.

My father had always been one step ahead, always thinking of the bigger picture. But now, that bigger picture was a target on his back.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath.

This was why Don Carlos was so fixated on keeping me close. It was why he hadn’t killed my father yet. It was why he was so obsessed with tying me to him through this engagement. He thought I knew something and thought I could lead him to the safe.

I didn’t know where it was. But now I had to find out—not for Don Carlos—but for my father and for everyone else who could be destroyed if that safe fell into the wrong hands.

The lies, the danger, the impossible tightrope I was walking. But one thing was clear—I couldn’t let Don Carlos win.

Somewhere out there, my father was alive, being kept prisoner because of what he knew and what he’d created.

And I’d be damned if I let that monster take him or his legacy.

MIRELLA

My father's old studio felt so eccentric to me as I stepped inside, shutting the door quietly behind me. Dust hung in the air, catching the faint rays of light streaming through the small, cracked window. The scent of oil paint and varnish still lingered, bringing back flashes of childhood memories—his steady hands, the quiet hum of jazz music, and the sound of his brush gliding across the canvas.

Now, the room felt foreign, almost haunted.

My shoes clicked against the worn wooden floor as I walked deeper into the studio, scanning every corner for a sign of the safe. It had been years since I'd last accessed it. Hell, I wasn't even sure I'd remember how to get to it. But if it held the secrets Don Carlos was after, I had to find it. Everyone had thought my dad kept the safe hidden in some warehouse outside town, but my father was the kind of man who loved being inconspicuous.

I paused in front of an old bookshelf, my fingers trailing over the spines of art books and journals. Somewhere behind this shelf was the safe. My father always said the best place to hide something valuable was in plain sight.

"Right, Dad, but you could've made this easier," I muttered, shoving the bookshelf aside. It groaned in protest, the weight testing every ounce of strength I had.

Finally, it budged, revealing a small steel safe embedded in the wall. My heart raced as I knelt in front of it, brushing away the layer of dust that had settled over the keypad.

“Alright, Mirella. Think,” I whispered to myself.

The password. What was it again?

I closed my eyes, trying to pull the memory from the recesses of my mind. He’d told me it was something simple, something I’d never forget. And then it hit me.

The date of my mother’s death.

My fingers hovered over the keypad for a moment before I entered the numbers. The safe beeped, and for a split second, I thought I’d gotten it wrong. But then, there was a soft click, and the door swung open.

Inside, everything was just as I remembered. A small stack of files, a few USB drives, and a leather-bound journal lay neatly arranged. My father’s meticulousness was still intact, even after all these years.

I pulled out the journal first, flipping through its pages. Names, dates, transactions—it was all there. Every deal he’d ever made, every asset he’d ever acquired. But it wasn’t just about the money. This was a roadmap to power.

Then I saw it. A separate note slipped between the pages, detailing access codes to something far more dangerous. Keys to weapons, encrypted files on criminal networks, and AI prototypes capable of things I didn’t want to imagine.

No wonder Don Carlos wanted this.

I grabbed my phone and dialed Enzo.

He picked up after the first ring. “Mirella. What’s wrong?”

I let out a shaky breath. “I found the safe. Don Carlos is keeping my father alive because he wants what’s inside it.”

There was a pause on the other end. “What’s in it?”

“Everything. Names, assets, and—” I hesitated, glancing down at the journal again. “Access to things that could make him unstoppable. Nuclear weapons. Advanced AI. Bombs.”

Enzo let out a low whistle. “That’s why he’s been so desperate. He’s not just after control. He’s after domination.”

“Exactly,” I said. “This narrows it down, doesn’t it? If we know what he wants, we can trace his moves. He’s probably already made contact with someone who can help him decrypt these files or access the weapons.”

Enzo’s tone shifted, sharp and focused. “That’s good. It gives me a lead. I’ll start digging into his recent transactions and see if he’s reached out to anyone with expertise in this kind of tech. Keep the contents safe, Mirella. If he gets even a whiff that you’ve accessed the safe—”

“I know,” I cut in. “He’ll kill my father. Or worse.”

The line went quiet for a moment before Enzo spoke again. “Mirella, are you okay?”

I laughed, though it came out more bitter than I intended. “I’m great, Enzo. My life’s a circus, and I’m the clown juggling secrets, lies, and the occasional death threat. What could possibly be wrong?”

His chuckle was dry but warm. “You’re tougher than you think. Just hang in there. I’ll call you when I have something.”

I ended the call and sat back on my heels, staring at the contents of the safe. The weight of it all pressed down on me, but I couldn't let it show. Not to Enzo. Not to Sergio. Not to anyone.

I slipped the files and USB drives into my bag, leaving the journal behind. The less I carried, the less chance of someone catching on.

I stood, my gaze drifted to an old painting leaning against the wall. It was one of my father's unfinished works, a portrait of a young girl with piercing eyes. My eyes.

He always said he painted it for me—to remind me that I was stronger than I believed.

“Well, Dad,” I muttered, “you'd better be right. Because this is going to get a lot worse before it gets better.”

I pushed the bookshelf back into place, wiping my hands on my jeans. There was no turning back now.

Don Carlos might think he's holding all the cards, but he's underestimated me.

And that would be his biggest mistake.

I was still staring at the painting he'd left unfinished years ago. The eyes on the canvas seemed to follow me as if my younger self were judging my every move. I sighed and shook my head. There wasn't time for sentimentality, not when Don Carlos was breathing down my neck and my father's life was hanging by a thread.

The sound of giggling pulled me out of my thoughts. It wasn't just any giggle. It was Alex's, the kind of laugh he only gave when he was truly happy. It was faint, but I recognized his giggle even in my sleep. It was rare, like sunshine after a storm, and it

caught me off guard. He was discharged last night, and I went out before he woke up today.

I froze for a moment, listening. It came from the living room, accompanied by the soft rumble of another voice. My heart raced as I made my way down the hallway.

What I saw stopped me dead in my tracks.

There was Sergio, sitting cross-legged on the floor with Alex. They were surrounded by action figures, cars, and a plastic dinosaur that had seen better days. Sergio was making ridiculous roaring sounds while Alex clutched his belly.

The sight was perfect.

For a split second, I let myself imagine what it would be like if Sergio was Alex's father—if we were just a normal family, free from lies and danger. If the three of us could sit on this floor, playing with toy dinosaurs and not worrying about the weight of the world crushing us. But that was a fantasy, and I didn't have time for fantasies.

It was clear Alex was still weak because he didn't run to me to give me the normal early morning hug, which would have followed with me giving him multiple kisses.

I cleared my throat, crossing my arms as I stepped into the room. "What are you doing here, Sergio?"

Sergio looked up, a playful smirk spreading across his face. "Come on, Mirella. It is a new day. Be cheerful, I just came to play with Alex."

I glanced at Alex, I couldn't help but smile at Alex's excitement even though his face was pale and he was still barely talking, but I kept my focus on Sergio. "This isn't a playground, Sergio. And you're not a babysitter. So again, why are you here?"

He stood up, dusting off his jeans but not losing the smirk. “We have a mission.” He moved away from Alex and nudged me to a corner far from Alex’s hearing.

I raised an eyebrow. “A mission? Are we storming a castle or robbing a bank? Because you look way too relaxed for either.”

He chuckled and stepped closer, lowering his voice. “It’s important, Mirella. But I thought I’d spend some time with this kid before we get into it. He’s a cool little guy.”

My stomach twisted. He didn’t know Alex was mine, and I had to keep it that way. “Oh, how noble of you.”

Sergio’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes flicked between me and Alex like he was trying to piece something together.

“You’re good with him,” I said, deflecting. “Better than I expected.”

He shrugged. “Kids like me. What can I say? I’m charming.”

Alex tugged on Sergio’s hand, looking up at him with wide eyes. “Are you staying for breakfast?”

Sergio crouched down, ruffling Alex’s hair. “I wish, buddy. But I have some grown-up stuff to take care of.”

Alex pouted, and for a moment, I felt guilty for dragging Sergio away. But the look Sergio gave me, half amusement, half curiosity—brought me back to reality. I wanted to get Sergio as far away as possible from Alex. I couldn’t risk Alex calling me mummy, which he should have done if not for how weak he was, and it had made him more quiet than usual.

“Alright,” I said, walking to the door and motioning for him to follow. “Let’s talk about this mission of yours. Alex, be good, okay? I’ll be back soon. Go find Dahlia upstairs.”

Alex waved as I led Sergio out into the hallway.

Once we were alone, Sergio leaned against the wall, his smirk returning. “You’re nervous.”

“About what?”

“About me spending time with Alex.”

I crossed my arms, glaring at him. “I’m nervous because you’re unpredictable, Sergio. And I don’t have time for surprises. Plus, I am not sure if Dahlia is cool with it,” my words were filled with lies, and I hated myself the more they escaped my mouth.

He leaned closer, his voice dropping. “Relax, Mirella. I’m not here to uncover your secrets.” He teased. “Not yet, anyway.”

My pulse quickened, but I kept my expression neutral. “Let’s just get to the point. What’s this mission?”

He straightened, his playful demeanor fading. “Don Carlos wants to meet tonight. Something about securing that shipment and tying up loose ends.”

“And you need me because...?”

“Because you’re the only one I can talk to. I feel we should give that shipment a break for now. Raven would be expecting us. And because I don’t trust him as far as I

can throw him.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “Fine. But you’re driving. And don’t even think about making any dinosaur noises on the way.”

Sergio laughed, heading toward the door. “No promises.”

I followed him out. I couldn’t shake the image of him with Alex. It was too perfect and too easy. And for someone like me, perfect and easy were dangerous.

SERGIO

The road stretched out in front of us, illuminated only by the faint glow of the moon. Mirella sat beside me, quiet and focused, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. I could feel the tension radiating off her like heat from a fire. It wasn't like her to be this quiet, and it unnerved me more than I cared to admit.

I reached under my seat and pulled out a gun, holding it out to her. "Take this."

She glanced at it and then at me, her eyes narrowing. "I'm not planning on getting into a shootout tonight."

"No one plans on it. That's why you need it. Just in case things go south."

She hesitated but eventually took the weapon, tucking it into the waistband of her jeans. "You better not get us killed, Sergio."

I smirked. "You've got to trust me some time."

She didn't respond, but her silence was louder than any words. Mirella didn't trust easily, and I wasn't about to pretend I'd earned it.

When we arrived at the drop-off point, the air felt heavier. It was too quiet, too still. My instincts were screaming at me, but I pushed the unease aside. A job was a job.

The buyer was already there, flanked by four men who looked more like tanks than humans. Mirella stood a little behind me, her face calm but her eyes scanning the area

like a hawk.

“We’re here for the shipment,” I said, keeping my tone neutral.

The buyer, a wiry man with a cigarette dangling from his lips, smiled. “Funny thing about shipments—they can get expensive.”

I stiffened. “We agreed on a price.”

“Prices change,” he said, flicking ash onto the ground.

I didn’t miss the subtle nod he gave to his men. They shifted, hands moving toward their weapons. Mirella’s hand brushed against mine, a small, almost imperceptible signal.

They were about to double-cross us.

“Duck!” I yelled, grabbing Mirella and pulling her down as gunfire erupted.

The next few moments were a blur of chaos. Bullets whizzed past us, pinging off metal and cracking into crates. Mirella pulled out the gun I’d given her and started shooting without hesitation.

I took out one of the guards but ran out of bullets before I could reload. “I’m out!”

“Just get to the shipment!” Mirella’s voice was sharp, commanding. “I’ll cover you!”

I hesitated. “I didn’t come this far to lose you, Mirella.”

“Move, Sergio! I can handle this!”

I didn't have time to argue. I sprinted toward the crates, dodging bullets and using the scattered cover to my advantage. I reached one of the men, tackled him to the ground, and wrestled his weapon from him. With his gun in hand, I fired off two quick shots, taking out the others nearby.

Turning back toward Mirella, I froze.

She wasn't just handling herself—she was fighting like someone who'd been doing this her whole life. She moved with precision, and her every action was calculated and efficient.

One of the guards, a man twice her size, lunged at her. Mirella sidestepped him with ease, grabbing his wrist and twisting until he dropped his weapon. Before he could react, she slammed her elbow into his face and followed it up with a shot to his chest.

Another man charged at her from behind. She spun, ducked under his swing, and drove her knee into his stomach. As he stumbled back, she disarmed him and put two bullets in him without flinching.

I stood there, stunned.

This wasn't the Mirella I remembered. The girl who used to blush when she got caught sneaking out of her father's house. The girl who always seemed to have her head in the clouds or the girl who got stuck in trees.

No, this Mirella was a force of nature. Fierce. Unstoppable.

When the last of the guards were down, she turned to me, standing tall with the gun still in her hand. Her chest rose and fell with each breath, but there was no fear in her eyes. Only determination.

For a moment, I didn't know what to say. I was not sure if I knew who she was.

She brushed past me, heading toward the shipment. "What are you staring at, Sergio? Let's get this done."

I followed her in silence, my mind racing. Mirella had always been a puzzle, but now she felt like a labyrinth. Every time I thought I had her figured out, she showed me another side of herself.

By the time we got back into the car, I still hadn't said a word.

She noticed. "What's wrong? Cat got your tongue?"

I shook my head, starting the engine. "You're full of surprises, that's all."

She laughed, a short, humorless sound. "Just call it survival instincts."

The drive back was quiet, but my thoughts were anything but. Mirella wasn't the naive girl I'd thought she was. She was stronger, more resilient, and far more dangerous than I'd ever realized. This wasn't just survival instinct when in danger. The way she moved, she was the predator, not the prey.

And yet, I couldn't decide if that scared me or impressed me.

When we pulled up to her place, I watched as she got out of the car. She barely made it to the door before her phone rang.

"What is it, Enzo?"

My ears perked up at the name, and I narrowed my eyes.

She turned, noticing me still sitting there. “I am sorry, something urgent came up, and I need to go now. You can see yourself out, Sergio.”

Without waiting for a response, she disappeared to the garage and drove out in another car in a hurry, leaving me alone with more questions than answers.

Who the hell was Enzo? And what else was Mirella hiding? I decided to say hi to Alex and check up on him before I left.

Alex’s laughter filled the room before I even stepped inside. That laugh—it had a way of cutting through the noise in my head, slicing right into something softer inside me. It wasn’t a sound I heard often, not from a kid like him.

I walked into the living room and saw him kneeling on the carpet, surrounded by a scattered army of tiny toy soldiers and a bright red firetruck that looked like it had taken more than a few beatings. As soon as Alex noticed me, his eyes lit up, and he sprinted toward me, arms outstretched.

“You are back!” he shouted like I was his favorite superhero.

Before I knew it, he’d latched onto my legs in a hug that made me stumble back a little. For such a little guy, he had a strong grip.

“Whoa, kid, you’re gonna knock me over!” I chuckled, patting the top of his dark, messy hair. “What are you up to, huh? Waging a war in here?”

Alex stepped back, grinning. “Just playing. Wanna help me? You can be the captain!”

It was hard to say no to a face like that, so I crouched down, picking up one of the battered soldiers. But as I settled in, something nagged at me. The room was quiet—too quiet for a house with Alex in it. Was he here alone? Where was Dahlia?

“Where’s your mom?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

Alex shrugged, busy arranging his army into two neat lines. “She went out.”

I stiffened. “Out? And she left you alone?”

He didn’t even look up, completely unfazed. “No, Dahlia’s here. She’s making lunch in the kitchen.”

“Dahlia?” I repeated, frowning. The name felt wrong. “You mean your mom?”

Alex paused, tilting his head as if I’d just asked the dumbest question in the world. “No, Dahlia is here. She’s in the kitchen.”

I stared at him, trying to make sense of what he’d just said. The way he said it, so matter-of-fact, sent a ripple of confusion through me.

Mirella was protective of Alex—maybe even overly so. I’d seen it and felt it. She never let him out of her sight unless it was with someone she trusted completely. She said Dahlia was his mom. So why was he calling Dahlia by name instead of “Mom”? It didn’t add up, and the longer I thought about it, the more my head spun.

Before I could press him further, Alex grabbed my sleeve. “Look! The captain’s ready!”

He handed me another toy soldier, and I forced myself to focus on the moment. I played along, letting Alex direct the battle while my mind raced in a dozen different directions.

A few minutes later, the sound of footsteps pulled my attention. Dahlia walked into the room, wiping her hands on a dish towel. Her eyes landed on me, and her

expression instantly hardened.

“What are you doing here, Sergio?”

Before I could answer, Alex beat me to it. He turned to Dahlia with a big smile. “Mama’s friend came to play with me!”

Her face went pale, and for a split second, I saw something flicker in her eyes. Panic? Maybe guilt? Whatever it was, it vanished almost as quickly as it appeared.

Dahlia’s tone was stern but gentle. “Alex, why don’t you go wash your hands? Lunch is almost ready.”

Alex hesitated, looking back and forth between us, but eventually, he got up and padded off to the bathroom.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Dahlia crossed her arms and glared at me. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I was checking in on Alex,” I said, keeping my voice calm. “He said you were in the kitchen. I didn’t realize Mirella wasn’t home.” I lied, trying to see if I could get Dahlia to slip up and help me make sense of the confusion brewing inside of me.

Her jaw tightened. “She had things to take care of. I’m here. That’s all that matters.”

I leaned against the doorway, not moving an inch. “What’s the deal, Dahlia? Why’s he calling you by your name like you’re the babysitter? What’s going on?”

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she looked at me like she was deciding whether I was worth the trouble.

Finally, she threw the dish towel onto the counter. “It’s none of your business, Sergio. Now, if you’re done asking questions, you can leave.”

Her words didn’t sting, but her tone did. This was the first ever conversation I had with Dahlia, and it wasn’t a friendly one. There was a finality in it that made me feel like I was being shut out of something important. And I hated that feeling.

“Fine,” I muttered, pushing off the doorway. “I’m leaving.”

But as I walked out, my mind was a whirlwind.

Something wasn’t right.

Alex wasn’t just any kid, and Mirella wasn’t just any other person in his life. She was too careful, too protective, too guarded. And the way Alex talked about her, the way he called Dahlia by name—it didn’t fit.

Pieces of a puzzle I hadn’t even realized I was trying to solve started clicking into place.

Mirella had always been a mystery to me. She could be sweet and soft one moment and cold and distant the next. She hid things—big things. I’d seen glimpses of the walls she kept up, but this felt different.

I drove back in silence, replaying the conversation with Alex in my head. The way he said “Mama’s friend” stuck with me like an echo I couldn’t shake.

Mirella was protecting Alex from something—or someone.

But what?

And, more importantly, why?

By the time I got home, my chest felt tight with unanswered questions. I knew one thing for certain: Mirella wasn't the naive girl I used to know. She was hiding something, and whatever it was, it wasn't small.

For the first time in years, I wasn't sure if I truly knew her at all.

SERGIO

The door to my room clicked shut behind me, and I leaned against it, letting out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. My mind was still reeling. Mirella, sweet, soft-spoken Mirella—had just disarmed and shot two men like she'd been doing it her whole life. And then there was Alex, calling Dahlia by name as though she wasn't his mother. Nothing made sense, and the more I thought about it, the more it felt like I'd been handed a script for a play that I didn't understand.

I rubbed a hand down my face and reached for my phone. There was one person I trusted to help me figure this out. I dialed Ryan, my right hand in everything important—and most things illegal.

“Get to my room,” I said as soon as he picked up. “Now.”

It wasn't long before Ryan walked in, his usual cocky grin in place. He leaned against the edge of my desk, arms crossed. “What's got you all worked up? You look like you've seen a ghost.”

I didn't waste time with pleasantries. “It's Mirella. Something's off.”

That wiped the grin off his face. “Off? How?”

I started pacing, the words tumbling out faster than I could organize them. “I went to check on Alex today. He ran to me like any kid would, but then he called Dahlia by her name. Not ‘Mom.’ Just Dahlia. When I asked, he said his mother wasn't home. Then Mirella—she wasn't even home.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Okay, weird, but maybe the kid’s confused? You know how kids are. Didn’t you say he had some high fever or something?”

I stopped pacing and turned to face him. “It’s not just that. She’s not who she’s pretending to be. We went on a mission to secure a shipment earlier, and she... she fought like a professional. Took down men twice her size without even flinching. And not just random flailing—she knew exactly what she was doing. Like she’s done it a hundred times before.”

Ryan let out a low whistle. “You’re telling me Mirella—‘Oh no, I can’t hurt a fly’ Mirella—took out trained men?”

“She did,” I said, my voice harder than I intended. “And it wasn’t just luck. She was methodical, fast, and calm. Too calm.”

Ryan tilted his head, considering me. “You think she’s hiding something?”

“I don’t think. I know.” I ran a hand through my hair, frustration building. “And I’m going to find out what it is. I need you to dig into her past, especially after she left New York. Use your contacts, your networks—anything you can. I need answers.”

Ryan didn’t move, his expression unreadable. “You sure about this? What if you’re wrong?”

“I’m not wrong,” I said firmly. “There’s something she’s not telling me, and I need to know what it is. Besides...” I hesitated, then decided to come clean. “I’ve been building my own network within my father’s empire. Quietly. If I’m right about Mirella, this might be bigger than we think.”

Ryan’s eyes widened. “You’re building a network behind Don Carlos’s back? Are you insane? I thought when you mentioned it earlier, it was something small for just

insider Intel, not a full-blown network. If he finds out—”

“I know what happens if he finds out,” I snapped. “But I’m not going to sit around and let him control my life. I’m building something for myself, something independent. I don’t want to be his puppet forever.”

Ryan sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that. But Sergio, you’re playing with fire. Your old man won’t think twice about putting a bullet in you if he sees you as a threat.”

“Then, I’ll make sure he never finds out till I want him to,” I said, my voice low and steady. “Are you with me or not?”

Ryan met my gaze, his expression serious. “I’m with you. Just be careful, man.”

He stood and headed for the door. “Give me a couple of hours. I’ll see what I can dig up.”

After he left, the silence in my room felt oppressive. I sat on the edge of my bed, staring at nothing in particular. My thoughts drifted to my father, Don Carlos—the man who’d built an empire on fear and blood. I knew what kind of man he was. Ruthless. Calculating. And completely without mercy.

Could I take him down if it came to that? Could I pull the trigger on my own father?

The thought made my stomach churn, but I knew the answer. If it came down to him or me, I’d do what I had to. Survival didn’t leave room for sentiment.

I was still lost in thought when Ryan returned about an hour later, a folder in hand. He tossed it onto the desk and gestured for me to sit.

“You’re going to want to hear this,” he said, his tone grim.

I leaned forward, my heart pounding. “How did you get this so fast?”

Ryan smirked, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I have a guy who has people who work undercover in big organizations, people who act as spies for competitors. I paid him enough to talk.”

Her organization? The words hit me like a punch to the gut. “What organization?”

Ryan opened the folder and flipped through the pages. “Mirella isn’t who you think she is. She’s got a network, Sergio. A big one. And she’s not just some small-time player. She’s The Raven.”

The room spun for a second, and I had to grip the edge of the desk to steady myself. “The Raven? You’re telling me Mirella—my Mirella—is the mastermind behind one of the most dangerous networks out there?”

Ryan nodded, his expression grim. “She’s been playing this role, pretending to be naive, sweet, and innocent. But in reality, she’s running one of the largest underground operations I’ve ever seen. She’s got connections everywhere—smuggling, intelligence, and arms deals. You name it, she’s in it. Her Head of Operations is a former hitman named Enzo.”

I slumped back in my chair, my mind racing. Mirella. The Raven. The pieces were starting to fit together, but the picture they formed was something I wasn’t ready for.

Ryan watched me carefully. “What’s the play, Sergio? You want me to keep digging, or do we confront her?”

I shook my head, still processing everything. “No. Not yet. If she’s been hiding this

from me, there's a reason. I need to figure out what her endgame is before I make a move."

Ryan hesitated and then nodded. "Just don't let this blindside you. The Raven isn't someone you mess with lightly."

Mirella had been pretending this whole time. The woman I thought I knew was wearing a mask, and underneath it was someone far more dangerous—and far more intriguing.

I sat in my car outside Mirella's house, my fingers drumming against the steering wheel. My mind was a swirling storm of questions, doubts, and realizations that wouldn't let up. Mirella. The Raven. They were the same person. It all lined up now, like puzzle pieces clicking together. The moments I'd brushed off as coincidences now screamed for attention.

The familiarity I'd felt when speaking to The Raven. Mirella's sudden absences at critical moments. The way she seemed to know things no one else did. And Enzo—that name. Hearing Ryan say it had sent me back to that moment when Mirella, so casually, had answered a call and said, "Enzo, I'll be there soon." She had no idea I'd caught that slip.

I gripped the wheel tighter. How could I have been so blind? All this time, she'd been living a double life, leading me to believe she was just an ordinary woman caught in extraordinary circumstances. But now, knowing her secret, I couldn't blame her. I wasn't exactly honest, either. I couldn't even tell her I was the masked man—the stranger who'd saved her all those years ago. We were both tangled in lies.

Still, this couldn't wait. I needed to talk to her and confront her. I had to know why

she'd kept this from me and if she suspected anything about my own secrets.

Taking a deep breath, I got out of the car and walked to the door. It opened before I could knock, and there she was, standing in a simple blouse and jeans, looking as unassuming as ever.

"Sergio?" Her voice was calm, but her eyes flicked over me, sharp and calculating. She was already assessing me, as The Raven would.

"We need to talk," I said. "It's important."

She studied me for a moment before stepping aside. "Come in. We can talk in the study."

The house was quiet, almost eerily so. As I followed her down the hall, my thoughts raced. What was the best approach? Should I be direct or ease into it? Part of me wanted to lay it all out, but another part hesitated. What if I scared her off? What if confronting her too harshly made her shut down?

The study was cozy, with warm lighting and bookshelves lining the walls. Mirella gestured for me to take a seat, but I stayed standing, my hands in my pockets to keep them from fidgeting. She leaned against the desk, arms crossed, waiting for me to speak.

"I've been thinking," I started, my voice steady despite the storm inside me. "About you. About everything."

Her brows furrowed slightly, a flicker of confusion crossing her face. "Sergio, what's this about?"

I stepped closer, my eyes locked on hers. "You've always been good at keeping

secrets, haven't you?"

She stiffened, just barely, but I caught it. The tiniest shift in her posture. "What do you mean?"

I smiled, but there was no humor in it. "Mirella. Or should I call you The Raven?"

MIRELLA

Sergio's actions have been strange lately. It's not the kind of strange where you notice little habits like forgetting his keys or being quiet at dinner. No, this was a different kind of strange. He was calculated and careful, almost like he was holding something back. It didn't sit right with me.

Every time I looked at him, something gnawed at me. His movements, his presence, even the way he kissed me—it all felt familiar. Too familiar. It wasn't just déjà vu. It was like watching a shadow flicker on the wall and realizing it was your own.

I couldn't shake it, especially when I remembered his words during that mission.

“I didn't come this far to lose you.”

The cadence, the tone—it mirrored the stranger's. The stranger who had saved me, the one who haunted me in quiet moments when my guard was down.

The thought was absurd, but it wouldn't leave me alone.

When I met up with Enzo at my office downtown after leaving Sergio, he wasn't pleased. “I'm close to finding your father,” he said, pacing the room like a caged wolf. “You want me to stop for this? To spy on Sergio?”

“Yes, but not stop. It's just a side job,” I replied without hesitation.

“Mirella,” he groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Do you know what you're

asking? Dividing attention now could cost us.”

I stood my ground. “I’ve worked with you long enough to know you can handle more than one thing at a time. I need answers, Enzo.”

His eyes narrowed. “What is it about Sergio that has you so jumpy?”

I hesitated, debating how much to share. Finally, I said, “During the mission, the way he moved, how he shot—it was familiar. Too familiar. And his words, Enzo... they reminded me of the stranger I told you about.”

Enzo froze. His silence unnerved me.

“You think it’s him?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, my voice quiet. “That’s what scares me.”

With a heavy sigh, Enzo nodded. “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you if this delays the bigger picture.”

When I returned home later that day, Dahlia was waiting for me in the living room. Her face held that look of concern she always wore when something was bothering her, but she didn’t know how to say it.

“Is Alex okay?” I asked, instinctively checking over her shoulder.

She nodded. “He’s fine. But Sergio was here earlier.”

My heart skipped. “What? Why?”

“He wanted to see Alex. They played together for a bit.”

That gnawing suspicion twisted deeper in my gut. “And?”

Dahlia’s expression tightened. “Alex told him I was in the kitchen making lunch, and Sergio looked unsettled. Like he was piecing something together.”

My mind raced. “What else did Alex say?”

Dahlia hesitated. “He called me by my name. Not ‘Mama.’”

I closed my eyes and let out a slow breath. Of course, Alex would do that. He had started calling me “Mama” ever since he would talk.

We were still talking when I heard the sound of tires crunching gravel outside. My chest tightened as I peered through the window. It was Sergio’s car.

Dahlia caught the look on my face and touched my arm. “I’ll take Alex upstairs.”

I nodded, steeling myself. When Sergio knocked, I opened the door and gestured for him to follow me to the study.

He didn’t waste time with pleasantries.

“I’ve been thinking,” he started, his voice calm but laced with something sharp. “About you. About everything.”

I crossed my arms, trying to appear indifferent. “Sergio, what’s this about?”

He stepped closer, his eyes locked onto mine. “You’ve always been good at keeping secrets, haven’t you?”

The question sliced through me. I forced myself to remain still, but my pulse was a

drum in my ears. “What do you mean?”

He smiled—a cold, humorless curve of his lips. “Mirella. Or should I call you The Raven?”

The air seemed to leave the room. My breath hitched before I could stop it, and my fingers tightened around the edge of the desk. I tried to school my expression, to hold onto any semblance of composure, but I knew the flicker of shock in my eyes had already betrayed me.

Sergio’s eyes were locked onto mine, sharp and unrelenting, like he could see through every wall I’d ever built.

“Enough of the lies, Mirella.” His voice was low, but the weight of it landed like a thunderclap. “You’ve been running circles around me, but not anymore. I’ve spent weeks watching, piecing it all together, and now I see you for who you really are.”

I didn’t flinch, though every nerve in my body screamed at me to run. My voice was steady, but barely. “You’re being ridiculous. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He took a step closer, closing the distance between us. “Don’t play dumb. The games, the masks, the double life—you don’t fool me.”

He clasped his hands together sharply, the sound echoing in the room like a warning shot. “You’re The Raven, Mirella. Don’t insult both of us by denying it.”

My chest tightened, but I kept my face calm. “You don’t know anything about me. You think you do, but you don’t.” I stepped back, trying to regain control, but he moved forward, matching me step for step. His presence was overwhelming, filling the room like a storm cloud.

“Don’t I?” His voice softened, turning dangerously smooth, but his eyes stayed hard. “I know you’re strong. I know you’re brilliant. And I know you’re a hell of a lot more dangerous than you want anyone to believe. You ain’t the naive girl you desperately want people to believe you are.”

His hand shot out, brushing a strand of hair from my face. His touch was gentle, almost tender, but the intensity in his gaze burned. “And I know this,” he said, his voice dropping lower, “this is the real you.”

I swatted his hand away, more to break the spell he was casting than anything else. My breathing was uneven, and my thoughts were racing.

I clenched my fists, the weight of his words pressing down on me. “You think you know it all, don’t you? You think you’ve figured everything out.”

“I don’t think so. I know .” His confidence was maddening, and the way he looked at me—like I was both a puzzle he’d solved and a secret he hadn’t uncovered yet—made me want to scream.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I challenged, taking a step closer, my voice rising. “If you’re so sure, say it. Say whatever you came here to say.”

He leaned in with his face inches from mine. “You’re The Raven, Mirella—the mysterious woman, the enigma, the shadow that’s been haunting the underworld for years.” His voice dropped to a whisper, but it carried the weight of a shout. “Admit it.”

He wasn’t guessing—he knew . The denial was on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it. My silence was answer enough.

His eyes flickered in triumph. “I knew it,” he murmured, almost to himself.

“You don’t know anything,” I snapped, desperate to regain control. “You don’t know what I’ve been through, what I’ve done.”

“Then tell me.” He moved closer, his voice laced with curiosity and something else I couldn’t place. “Tell me everything. Explain why you’ve been lying to me since the day you came back.”

I folded my arms, trying to shield myself from the weight of his words. “I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell you everything. There’s a difference.”

His laugh was sore, cutting. “Spare me the semantics. You’ve been keeping secrets, Mirella. Big ones. You sat across a table from me as The Raven. And for what? To protect yourself, or are you just so used to hiding that you don’t know how to be honest anymore?”

“That’s rich coming from you, someone who hides his real self from his father, talking to me about honesty,” I shot back, my voice shaking with fury. His jaw tightened, and for a moment, I thought I’d hit a nerve. But then he smirked again, that maddening, infuriating smirk. “This isn’t about me,” he said, his voice soft but firm. “This is about you. About why you couldn’t trust me.”

“I don’t trust anyone,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

He stepped closer, his eyes burning into mine. “Maybe that’s the problem.”

His hand cupped my cheek, and I hated how my body reacted to his touch, how my skin warmed under his palm. I should have pulled away, but I couldn’t.

“You need to stop pushing Sergio. It is driving me insane,” I whispered, the admission slipping out before I could stop it.

“Good,” he said, his voice low and rough. “Because you’ve been driving me insane. I am going crazy just thinking about you.”

I pushed his hand away, forcing myself to put some distance between us. “You don’t get to do this,” I said, my voice trembling. “You don’t get to walk in here, accuse me of lying, and then act like you care and know it all.”

“But I do care,” he replied, his voice soft but fierce. “That’s the problem. I care too damn much.”

The weight of his words hit me like a freight train. I opened my mouth to respond, but no sound came out.

“Mirella,” he said, stepping closer, his voice a mix of anger and desperation. “I didn’t come this far to lose you. Not now. Not after everything.”

The way he said it, the way his voice broke on the last word—it was too much. My chest ached, and my eyes stung with unshed tears.

“I can’t do this,” I whispered, turning away from him.

“Mirella, can’t you see I don’t care if you are Mirella or The Raven. All I care about is you. That is the only truth I know,” he said, his voice hardening.

I turned back to him, my eyes blazing. “Sometimes the truth isn’t always black or white. There are shades of gray, Sergio.”

For the first time, his confidence faltered. His smirk disappeared, and something flickered in his eyes—something that looked a lot like guilt.

The silence between us was deafening. I wanted to hate him for unraveling me

without warning, to push him away, but I couldn't. Not when his presence was the only thing keeping me grounded.

"Sergio," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Why are you doing this? You know the risk, don't you?"

His gaze softened as he closed the distance between us, and for a moment, I thought he might say something else. Instead, he just said, "Because I can't lose you."

I didn't have time to respond before his lips crashed into mine. The taste of his lips was like wildfire, fierce and consuming. His hands moved to my waist, pulling me closer as if he couldn't stand the thought of any distance between us.

I gasped against his mouth, and he took the opportunity. He fondled my hair and pressed on, his tongue already curled up in mine, teasing mine in a way that lit up the fire in my heart. My hands found their way to his shoulders, fingers clutching at the fabric of his shirt as I surrendered to the overwhelming sensation of him.

"Sergio," I breathed as his lips trailed from my mouth to my jawline, then to the sensitive spot just beneath my ear.

"Say it again," he murmured against my skin, his voice a low growl that weakened the fiber of my being. "Say my name again."

"Sergio," I whispered, and his hands tightened on my waist in response, cupping firm my butts with his palm and gently squeezing them until it made me squirm, his name slipping from my lips like a prayer.

He pulled back just enough to look at me, his eyes dark with desire. "Tell me to stop," he said, his voice rough, but there was a vulnerability there, a hesitation.

I shook my head, my hands sliding up to cup his face. “Don’t you dare.”

That was all the permission he needed. In one swift motion, I was above the ground, and I wrapped my legs around his waist instinctively. He carried me to the couch in my study, his lips never leaving mine, the urgency between us building with every passing second.

He laid me down, his hands reaching for the side lamp by the couch, flickering it off.

I felt safe and utterly exposed all at once. His hands roamed over my body, and his lips firmly locked on mine. I stylishly adjusted, allowing him to strip me, sliding my dress up. He held the gown over my face, and he kissed me, the cotton material between our lips.

I squirmed, intrigued and desperate for his touch. His hand cupped my breasts, and I gasped, a tingling sense of excitement washing over me.

Gently, he raised the gown over my head in one fluid motion. His eyes raked over me, and the way he looked at me as though I were the only thing in the world calmed my demons.

“You’re perfect,” he said, and the sincerity in his voice made me feel like I might shatter.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t answer. Words felt inadequate.

“You’re incredible,” he said, his voice thick with emotion as his lips found the hollow of my throat. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

Sergio left his marks all over my neck. He trailed his tongue from my neck and stopped, his head buried in my bosom. I shut my eyes. Each touch ignited a fire under

my skin, and I couldn't help but arch into him, needing more, silently begging for his touch. He held one of my breasts and kneaded my nipple between his thumb, his mouth on the other nipple. I moaned loudly and felt a wet trickle between my legs.

I tugged at his shirt, needing to feel his skin against mine. He obliged, pulling it off and tossing it aside, revealing a body sculpted like it had been carved from stone. My fingers traced the lines of his muscles, marveling at the strength and warmth of him.

"You're driving me insane, with all you to me," I managed to tease, though my voice was breathless.

He chuckled, the sound low and intoxicating, before lowering himself back down, his lips capturing mine in a kiss that was slower this time and more deliberate. It wasn't just desire. It was something deeper, something that terrified me even as it consumed me.

Our bodies moved together, a synergy that felt as natural as breathing. Instinctively, my legs spread wide open, aching for his touch. He slowly kissed my legs and paused, his eyes consumed with desire.

"I want to do unspeakable things to you," he declared, a fiery gaze in his eyes.

He moved downwards, and I felt his breath just inches away from being buried in between my thighs. I waited, anticipating. He slid his tongue in, and I let out a loud moan, my hand clutching his hair. He slid his tongue in and out of my wetness, one of his hands gently fondling my clitoris, the other on my nipple. Bursts of light sparkled in my eyes as my legs began to tremble from the sensation that threatened to burn all the senses in my body.

Sergio grinned as I quietened down. He gathered me into his arms and laid me on his chest.

“What was that?” I asked in disbelief, shocked by the entire experience.

He chuckled lightly, his hand caressing my bare skin. “Something to drive you totally crazy.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, chuckling. “You think you are the only one with crazy ideas?”

He laughed, his eyes twinkling at the challenge. “Want to show me yours?”

I giggled and stretched my hands to his erect length. I heard a low moan escape his lips. I sat up and ran my hands over the length of his hardness and watched his eyes fasten on me, trying to control the torture I was putting him through.

I kissed the tip of his manhood, then swallowed the length of him into my mouth, stroking and thrusting, my tongue moving up and down in rhythmic thrusts. Sergio gripped my hair, his eyes begging me to release him. I smiled and increased the tempo, deliberately punishing him.

“Beg me,” I challenged him, my tongue squeezing the cap of his hard length.

“Please,” he begged.

I smiled and sat over him with my eyes fixed on him. Slowly, I guided him inside, in between my wet thighs and began to move my waist, thrusting in and out of him. Sergio could not stand the torture. He held my waist and rammed into me, his eyes fiery, a contorted line on his forehead. He pulled out and knelt behind me. I bent low, allowing him access to take me from behind, urgently waiting and desirous of him. Quickly, he guided himself into my vagina; the sheer feeling of his erectness inside me made me moan. Wordlessly, he thrust in and out of me, increasing his tempo with each thrust.

Together, we rode each other; by the time we reached the crescendo, I wasn't sure where I ended and where he began.

Afterward, as we lay tangled together on the couch, our breaths mingling in the quiet. He brushed a strand of hair from my face and smiled—a real, genuine smile that softened his features in a way I hadn't seen before.

“I have waited forever to have you like this again,” Sergio whispered in my ears, but my eyelids were already so heavy, sleep threatening to consume me.

What does he mean by like this again ? My eyes shut.

MIRELLA

I woke up to the warmth of sunlight streaming through the curtains. We had slept through the night on this couch.

For a moment, everything felt peaceful. My head rested against the arm of the couch, and I could hear the faint sound of Sergio's steady breathing beside me. His arm was wrapped protectively around my waist, his warmth seeping into my skin. It was the first time in forever that I had woken up feeling safe.

Carefully, I slipped out of his hold, trying not to disturb him. I reached for my dress on the floor, pulling it on as quietly as I could. The sight of Sergio—his hair mussed, face relaxed—made me pause. How could a man like him, so guarded, look so at ease? It tugged at something in me, something I didn't want to examine too closely.

I stepped closer to wake him, my hand hovering over his shoulder. As I leaned in, my eyes caught something on his arm. A tattoo, bold and unmistakable, peeked out from his arm. My breath hitched. It was the same tattoo—the intricate design, the name Jacqueline . My stomach plummeted as the pieces began to fall into place, each sharper than the last.

Jacqueline. Sergio's mother.

I had seen this tattoo before. I knew it very well.

My heart raced, the blood roaring in my ears. I stumbled back, bumping into the edge of the coffee table with a thud. The noise startled Sergio awake. He blinked groggily,

a lazy smile spreading across his face when he saw me.

“Mirella?” His voice was low, rough with sleep, but I barely registered it. My eyes were glued to his arm, and my chest tightened.

I pointed at the tattoo, my hand shaking. “Your... your tattoo.” The words tumbled out of me, barely coherent. “You’re... you...”

His smile vanished. His eyes followed my gaze to his arm, and in that split second, I saw it—the flicker of realization, the panic that flashed across his face.

“Let me explain—” He swung his legs off the couch, scrambling to sit up, but I took a step back, shaking my head.

“No.” My voice cracked, but I couldn’t stop the flood of words. “You—Sergio, you’re him . You’re the stranger. The mask, the voice, it was you all along!”

He stood, reaching for me, but I moved further away. My heart pounded, my thoughts spiraling out of control.

“You’ve been lying to me this whole time! Talking about secrets, about trust, when you’ve been keeping the biggest one of all!” I was rambling, pacing the room as if that could somehow help me process what was happening. “You saved me. You disappeared, you—” My voice broke, anger and confusion tangling together. “You let me believe you were dead!”

“It wasn’t like that,” he started, his hands raised in a calming gesture. He was still shirtless, his tattoo glaring at me like an accusation. “Mirella, you need to calm down.”

“Calm down?” I let out a bitter laugh, throwing my hands in the air. “You lied to me,

Sergio. Do you have any idea what you put me through? You—” My voice rose, and I jabbed a finger in his direction. “You wore a mask. You slept with me, then died like some tragic hero. And now you’re here, acting like you’re just... just Sergio!”

“I am Sergio,” he said firmly, taking a cautious step toward me. “The stranger, the mask—yes, it was me. But I didn’t lie to hurt you.”

“Oh, well, that makes it all better,” I snapped, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “You didn’t mean to hurt me. So it’s fine that you shattered my life and made me question everything I thought I knew! I fucking mourned you,” I was pacing again, my hands gesturing wildly as I tried to release the storm building inside me.

He ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. “Mirella, listen to me. It wasn’t just some game. I—”

“Don’t you dare try to justify this!” I cut him off, spinning to face him. “You came here yesterday, all righteous, grilling me about secrets and honesty. And the whole time, you were sitting on this!” I gestured toward his arm, my voice shaking.

His jaw tightened, and he exhaled sharply. “I had reasons for what I did.”

“Reasons?” I laughed, but it sounded hollow. “What reasons could possibly justify this, Sergio? You manipulated me, you—” My voice cracked again, the weight of it all pressing down on me. “You made me feel like I could trust you. Like you were the one person I could rely on. And now...” I trailed off, my throat tightening.

“I never wanted to hurt you,” he said quietly, his voice pleading. He stepped closer, but I held up a hand to stop him.

“Don’t,” I warned, my voice trembling. “Don’t come any closer.”

He froze, his hands dropping to his sides. “Mirella, please. Let me explain.”

“I don’t want your explanations,” I shot back. “I want the truth. The whole truth, Sergio. No more half-truths, no more secrets. Who are you? What else are you hiding?”

“Mirella, I’ve always been real with you. The stranger, Sergio—both are me. I never lied about how I felt or about what you mean to me.”

“Don’t.” My voice broke, tears stinging my eyes. “Don’t say that. You don’t get to play the feelings card here.”

“I’m not playing anything,” he said, his tone sharp now. “You think this was easy for me? Watching you suffer, knowing I couldn’t tell you the truth without putting you in more danger?”

“Danger?” I echoed, my voice rising. “You’re the danger, Sergio! You lied. You faked a whole ass death. For what? For fucking what end—”

“To save you!” he snapped, his voice cutting through mine. “Mirella. Again and again. And I’d do it all over if it meant keeping you safe.”

My chest ached, my mind racing as I tried to reconcile the man standing before me with the one I thought I knew.

I pointed at his arm again, my voice trembling. “That tattoo. Jacqueline. Your mother. You’ve always covered it up. Why didn’t you just tell me since?”

His gaze softened, but his jaw remained tense. “Because I knew this moment would come. And I knew you’d hate me for it.”

“Hate you?” I laughed bitterly, tears spilling over. “I don’t even know you, Sergio.”

“You know me,” he insisted, his voice fierce. “You know me better than anyone. And no matter how much you try to deny it, you know I’ve always been on your side.”

My mind raced back to that night, the stranger’s hands on me, his whispered words, and the way he made me feel alive when everything else was crumbling.

“I’ve always had feelings for you.” His voice was steady, but his expression was tight—like he was holding himself together by a thread.

The words hit me like a slap. I froze mid-step, turning to face him fully. “What?”

“Since we were kids,” he said, his tone softer now, almost hesitant. “I’ve always loved you. And when I heard...” He stopped, running a hand through his hair like he didn’t know how to continue.

“When you heard what?” My arms were crossed tightly over my chest, but my voice had lost some of its edge.

“When I heard my father was marrying you.”

That was it. My composure snapped like a twig. I let out a sharp laugh, though there was nothing funny about any of it. “So, you decided the best way to handle your lifelong feelings was to show up in a mask and seduce me?”

His jaw clenched, and he looked at me like he wanted to explain but didn’t know how. “It wasn’t about seduction,” he said finally. “I just... I wanted to remind you of what we had when we were younger. I wanted to make you feel something again—something real.”

“Something real?” I repeated, my voice dripping with disbelief. “You mean like the real fact that you didn’t tell me who you were? That you let me think you were some stranger?”

“I didn’t know how you’d react if I came as myself.” He took another step forward, and this time, I didn’t move back. I just stared at him, my arms still crossed, my nails digging into my skin. “We hadn’t spoken in years, Mirella. After the way I left, I wasn’t sure if you’d even want to see me. The mask... it was easier.”

I let out another laugh, this one even harsher than the first. “Easier. Easier than just showing up as you. So instead, you thought, ‘Hey, I’ll just show up as a masked stranger and hope she runs away with me.’”

He winced, but he didn’t deny it.

“How naive do you think I am, Sergio? Did you honestly think I’d just pack a bag and leave my life for some guy in a mask?”

“No,” he admitted, his voice low. “But I had to try. I couldn’t just let you marry him.”

I blinked at him, caught off guard. “So that’s why you saved me at the wedding? To stop me from marrying your father?”

His gaze met mine, steady and unflinching. “Yes. That morning, I heard what he was planning to do to you—how he wanted to disgrace you and humiliate you in front of everyone. I couldn’t let that happen. I came as fast as I could, but by the time I got there...”

“Then you were shot.” My voice was barely a whisper now, the memory flashing through my mind like a bad dream.

He nodded. “Afterward, I escaped. Ryan helped me. I tried to find you, but you were gone.”

I shook my head, trying to process everything. “You should’ve just stayed gone.”

“Mirella...” His voice was soft, pleading. “I don’t like my father any more than you do. Everything he does is for power and control. I came back because I wanted to bring him down. He’s hurt too many people, and I couldn’t let him hurt you again.”

I stared at him, my heart pounding. His words hung in the air between us, heavy and suffocating. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe that he’d done it all for me, that his intentions had been pure. But the weight of his lies pressed down on me, making it impossible to breathe.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this when I came back?” My voice cracked, and I hated how vulnerable I sounded.

“I tried,” he said, his voice strained. “But you were engaged to him again, and the situation was... complicated.”

“Complicated?” I laughed bitterly. “You think that justifies any of this? You think that makes it okay to keep lying to me, to keep pretending?”

“I wasn’t pretending,” he said firmly, stepping closer. “Everything I’ve done, everything I’ve said—it was all real. My feelings for you are real, Mirella. They’ve always been real.”

I closed my eyes, shaking my head. “I don’t know if I can believe you. Who else knows what you’re hiding?”

He took another step closer, his hands reaching for mine. “Please. Don’t do this. I’ve

made mistakes, but everything I've done was for you."

I pulled my hands away, taking a step back. My chest felt like it was caving in, the weight of his words pressing down on me like a stone.

"I can't do this, Sergio," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Mirella." His voice was broken now, desperate. "Please. Don't let him win. Don't let him take you from me."

"It's not about him." My voice wavered, but I forced myself to look him in the eye. "It's about you. It's about the fact that we both have been keeping secrets and can't trust one another."

"You can," he said urgently, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "You can trust me. I'll prove it to you. Just give me a chance."

I shook my head, tears streaming down my face. "I can't, I have so much to lose."

"I love you," he said, his voice breaking.

The words cut through me like a knife, but they didn't change anything. I wiped my tears, forcing myself to stand tall.

"I'm marrying your father," I said, the words tasting like ash in my mouth.

His eyes widened, the shock evident. "You don't mean that."

"I do." My voice was steady now, even as my heart shattered. "It's over, Sergio."

The look on his face was one I'd never forget—pain, betrayal, and disbelief all rolled

into one. But I didn't let myself dwell on it. I turned away, forcing myself to leave before I could change my mind.

SERGIO

“It is over, Sergio.”

The cold air bit at my skin as I stepped out of Mirella’s apartment. My chest felt hollow, as though I’d left my heart behind in that room with her. I wanted to stay, to hold her, to tell her that none of this mattered as long as we had each other. But it did matter—to her.

I dragged a hand through my hair, frustration curling in my gut. How had it come to this? I’d been so certain that once she knew the truth, she’d understand just like I did about her being The Raven. That she’d see I was the same Sergio who had adored her since we were kids. The same boy who carried her down the tree.

But I wasn’t that boy anymore, was I? And this isn’t the same as her hiding that she is The Raven.

I had lied to her. About my identity, everything. Not because I wanted to hurt her—God, I’d rather die than do that—but because I didn’t know how else to reach her. Mirella wasn’t the same girl I’d fallen for, either. She was stronger now and guarded. And maybe she was right to be.

Still, hearing her say she’d marry my father. That gutted me.

I reached my car and leaned against the hood, staring up at the sky. The sun blinked down at me, indifferent to my heartbreak. How ironic. The world kept spinning, the sun kept shining, and here I was, falling apart.

“She’ll marry him,” I muttered, my voice bitter. “Over my dead body, I would rather die.”

I didn’t care what it took. I would win her back. I had to.

When I finally drove back to the estate, the mansion loomed ahead like some dark fortress, as cold and unwelcoming as the man who ruled it. My father’s car was still parked in the circular driveway, which meant he was home. Great. Just what I needed.

I let myself in quietly, hoping to avoid him. But as I passed the study, I heard his voice—low, sharp, and unmistakable. It wasn’t unusual for him to be barking orders early in the morning, but something about his tone made me pause.

“...don’t trust her,” he was saying.

I froze with my hand on the banister.

“She’s not as innocent as she pretends to be,” he continued. “The emergency with her assistant’s son? Convenient excuse, don’t you think? Right when we had a shipment to save—a shipment Sergio lost because of her. Too convenient.”

My stomach churned. Mirella. He was talking about her.

Another voice responded, calmer but equally firm. “It’s possible she genuinely had an emergency, Don Carlos. We don’t have solid proof yet.”

“I don’t need proof to smell a rat,” my father snapped. “She agreed to this engagement far too easily. A woman like her, agreeing to marry me without a fight with no persuasion from her daddy like before? No. She’s hiding something. And where was she for those five years she disappeared, huh? Why did she suddenly come

back? What is she after?"

My chest tightened as I leaned closer to the door, straining to hear.

"Do you want me to dig deeper?" the other man asked.

"Of course I do," Don Carlos barked. "I want every detail about her life. Where she was, who she was with, what she's hiding. And I want it yesterday. So get on it. If she's lying to me..." He trailed off, but his meaning was clear.

The other voice dropped, too quiet for me to catch his response, but my father's sharp laugh followed.

"Good. Let's see how innocent Mirella really is."

I didn't need to hear any more. I stepped away from the door, my mind racing.

He was onto her.

I didn't know what he'd find or how far he'd go, but I knew one thing for certain: Mirella was in danger. And I couldn't stand by and let him ruin her.

My heart was pounding as I headed back to my car, my father's voice echoing in my head.

"Where was she for those five years?"

I knew the answer. She was becoming The Raven. If I could find out her secret, he could as well. Whatever secrets she had, they were hers to tell—not his to exploit.

I started the engine, determined to stop him no matter what, "I won't let him hurt you,

Mirella,” I muttered to myself as I drove as fast as I could.

The tires screeched as I pulled out of the driveway, heading back to the one person I couldn’t bear to lose.

I parked outside Mirella’s house for the second time that day. My hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. The sound of my father’s voice still echoed in my head, sharp and menacing.

I slammed the door shut behind me and made my way up the steps. Thankfully Dahlia had let me in when I told her it was a matter of life and death and that Mirella was in danger. The house was quiet, the kind of stillness that made my pulse quicken. I tried the handle. It wasn’t locked.

Mirella’s voice reached me, low and soothing, followed by the unmistakable giggle of a child.

“I’ll read you the rest tomorrow, Alex. Now, off to your room,” she murmured.

My feet froze mid-step. Alex. The name hit me like a freight train, and before I could even process it, I heard the small voice respond.

“Okay, Mama.”

Mama.

The air left my lungs as I stumbled back into the shadows. A thousand images flashed through my mind, memories I hadn’t pieced together until now. The way Mirella shielded him, the hesitation whenever I asked her whose child it was, and how he had called Dahlia by name—I had my suspicions, but this was the proof. The little boy’s eyes were the same shade as mine.

How had I been so blind? His eyes, they were mine.

The door to the hallway creaked, and Alex padded out, clutching a stuffed bear. He looked up at me, his head tilting slightly, and he gave me a smile before wrapping his hands around my legs.

“Hi. You are back,” he said softly, his voice curious but unafraid.

“Hi,” I managed, my throat dry.

“Did you bring another dinosaur for me?”

My chest tightened. Mirella appeared behind him, her face pale as a ghost when she saw me standing there. Her eyes darted to Alex and then back to me.

“Alex, sweetheart, go see Dahlia,” she said, her voice calm but firm.

“But I want to play with him—”

“Now,” she insisted.

He hesitated for a moment before nodding, giving me one last curious glance as he shuffled off.

The room fell silent, the air between us heavy. Mirella crossed her arms, her expression guarded.

“You’re not leaving until I explain, are you?”

I stepped closer, my heart pounding in my chest. “Alex called you Mama.”

She flinched, the tiniest movement, but it was enough.

“I’ve been blind, yes, but not stupid. Is he mine? I mean, he belongs to the stranger?”

Her lips parted as if to deny it, but then she closed them. Mirella sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Yes, Sergio. He’s yours.”

The world tilted on its axis. My knees felt weak, but I forced myself to stay upright and focused.

“You never told me he was your son. Was it because you knew I was the stranger? Why?” I said, my voice shaking.

“I didn’t know,” she snapped, her tone sharp enough to cut glass. “Not until today. Not until...” Her gaze flickered to my arm, to the tattoo that had unraveled everything. “Until I realized you were the stranger.”

“Why did you tell me he was Dahlia’s son?”

She threw her hands up, exasperated. “Because I didn’t want him caught up in this life! In my life. Do you have any idea what it’s like to carry the weight of that decision? To know that if I made the wrong call, he could end up in danger?”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I took a shaky breath, trying to process everything. “You didn’t trust me enough to protect him if I knew he was yours?”

“It’s not about trust,” she said, her voice softer now, almost pleading. “It’s about reality. Look at the world we live in, Sergio. Do you really think it’s safe for him to be part of it? Look at all the lies and secrets we have been keeping. Is that the life we want for him?”

I ran a hand over my face, trying to make sense of it all. “He’s my son, Mirella. I deserve to be part of his life.”

Her eyes softened for a moment before she steeled herself. “Not right now. Not with everything going on. It’s too complicated.”

“Complicated?” I scoffed. “Do you think I care about complicated? I shot my own father for you. I’d do it again in a heartbeat. But you don’t even give me the chance to prove I can protect him, to prove I can be a father to him.”

She flinched at my words, but I didn’t stop.

“You think keeping him from me is the solution? What happens when he starts asking questions, Mirella? When he wants to know who his father is?”

“I’ll deal with it when the time comes,” she said, her voice trembling. “Right now, my priority is keeping him safe.”

The room fell silent again. I took a step back, shaking my head.

“I don’t want us to keep arguing, and I am not giving up on him or us,” I said, my voice low. “But right now, you need to know something. My father is onto you. He’s having you investigated. He doesn’t trust you, and he’s digging for dirt.”

Her face paled even further, her bravado crumbling just slightly.

“He’s what?”

“I overheard him talking to an investigator off the hallway this morning when I got home. He knows about the assistant’s son, and he doesn’t believe your story. He’s suspicious, Mirella, and he’s not going to stop until he uncovers everything.”

She stared at me, her eyes wide, her lips parted, but no words came out. She just stood there, staring at me, the shock evident in her eyes.

“You need to stop whatever game you’re playing,” I warned. “Because if he finds out the truth, it won’t just be you who gets hurt. Alex will be in danger, too.”

MIRELLA

The words hung in the air like smoke—“Because if he finds out the truth, it won’t just be you who gets hurt. Alex will be in danger, too.”

I could still hear Sergio’s voice and see the desperation in his eyes. He was right, of course, but what choice did I have? My mind felt like a storm, churning, wild, and relentless. There was too much at stake. I could see the path ahead was dangerous, but it was the only one left to take.

Tonight was the engagement party Don Carlos had mentioned. A little party, he called it, as if the weight of it didn’t press on every bone in my body. But it wasn’t just an engagement party to me. It was an opportunity. My opportunity.

I turned to Sergio. He hadn’t moved, his expression torn between anger and hurt. “I need to do this.”

“You don’t,” he shot back, his voice low but forceful. “You think you do, but there are other ways, Mirella. Let me help you.”

His words were almost a plea, but I shook my head. “This isn’t just for my son, Sergio. I need to do this for my father.”

He blinked, confusion flooding his face. “Your father?”

“Yes.”

“You’re talking like he’s alive,” he said slowly like he was trying to put pieces together that didn’t fit. “Mirella, your father is dead.”

“That’s what everyone thinks,” I cut in, forcing myself to stay calm, to stay steady, even as my voice trembled. “But he isn’t. I have sources, Sergio. He’s out there somewhere. Don Carlos is keeping him hostage, and I’m going to find him.”

His shock was a living thing written across his face. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I needed to be sure,” I answered simply, my words quiet but firm. “I had to know where your loyalty lies.”

He stepped back like I’d struck him. “Where my loyalty lies? Mirella, you think I would betray you? After everything?”

“You work for Don Carlos, and he is your father,” I reminded him. “Your world is dangerous. If he so much as suspected...”

“My loyalty has always been to you,” Sergio cut in, his voice hoarse, his fists clenched like he was holding himself back. “Don’t you get that? I would burn this entire world to the ground for you, Mirella.”

The fire in his words softened something in me, but I couldn’t afford to falter. Not now. “I believe you,” I whispered, “but this is something I need to do myself.”

He shook his head, running a hand through his hair, frustration pouring off him in waves. “Let me find him for you. Give me time, Mirella. I can do this.”

“You think I have time?” I countered, my voice rising before I could stop it. “Don Carlos is already suspicious of me. He’s digging into my past. If I don’t act now, he’ll uncover everything, and then I’ll lose my chance. I have to move quickly, Sergio.”

“You’re walking straight into the fire,” he muttered, looking at me like he could change my mind. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do,” I answered. “I know you mean well, but my mind is made up.”

He looked at me then, really looked at me, his expression unreadable. The silence stretched long between us before he finally spoke. “I’m not giving up, Mirella. Not on you, not on this.”

“For now,” I answered softly, “just take a back seat. That’s all I’m asking.”

He exhaled sharply like he’d lost some unseen fight. “Fine. I’ll respect your wishes. But promise me something—if you need help, if you so much as stumble, you call me. No hesitation.”

“I promise,” I said, the words feeling heavier than they should have.

He stepped closer, and his gaze locked on mine. For a moment, I thought he might say more, but instead, he leaned in and kissed me on my forehead—softly, like it was goodbye, like he was afraid I might disappear. I didn’t pull away.

When he left, the room felt colder and emptier, and for a long moment, I stood alone in the silence. My hands shook as I pulled out my phone and dialed Enzo.

He picked up on the second ring. “Hello Raven. What’s going on?”

“Don Carlos is on to me,” I said, cutting straight to the point. “He’s having me investigated. He doesn’t believe a word I’ve said again.”

“Of course, he doesn’t. He’s a paranoid bastard,” Enzo muttered. “You knew this was a risk, Mirella.”

“I know,” I answered, steadying my voice. “But that’s not all. He’s digging for more—who I am, where I’ve been. If he finds out about Alex...”

Enzo swore under his breath. “That’s not going to happen. I told you that I’ve got leads, and I’m going to check them out tonight. I think I’m close.”

“Good,” I said, trying to sound hopeful even as the tension knotted in my chest. “Because tonight’s the engagement party. I’ll use it as a chance to check Don Carlos’ study. If there’s anything about my father—where he might be—I’ll find it there.”

“Mirella, that’s dangerous.”

“It’s my only shot,” I countered. “I won’t waste it.”

Enzo paused, his silence heavy. “Be careful, Raven. Don’t do anything too dangerous.”

“I won’t,” I assured him. “You just focus on your lead.”

Ending the call, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding. I could feel the pressure of the night pressing down on me, but I didn’t have the luxury of second-guessing myself. This was the only way forward.

I walked down the hall to Alex’s room, pausing when I saw him sitting on the carpet, his head resting in Dahlia’s lap. She was running her fingers gently through his hair.

“Mama!” Alex called, spotting me. He scrambled to his feet, running over and throwing his little arms around me.

I kissed the top of his head, inhaling the warm, sweet scent of him. “My love.”

Dahlia smiled up at me, her eyes soft and understanding.

“Watch over him tonight,” I said, brushing a strand of Alex’s hair from his face. “Please.”

Dahlia nodded, her expression turning serious. “Always.”

I looked at my son one last time, memorizing every bit of his perfect face, before pressing a kiss to his forehead. “I love you, Alex. Be good for Dahlia.”

“I will,” he mumbled sleepily.

As I straightened, I met Dahlia’s gaze again. “Keep him safe,” I whispered.

“I will,” she repeated, her voice steady.

And with that, I turned away, leaving a piece of my heart behind.

The ballroom was dripping in opulence—golden chandeliers, crimson curtains, marble floors polished to a mirror shine. The kind of place that felt more like a gilded cage than a celebration. My reflection danced across the floor as I was paraded around on Don Carlos’ arm like a prize he’d just won. He smiled that cold, practiced smile, whispering pleasantries to men in suits and women dripping in jewels, his grip on my waist just tight enough to remind me that I wasn’t here by choice.

“Isn’t she stunning?” Don Carlos boomed, his voice laced with smugness as he introduced me to yet another associate. “My fiancée, Mirella.”

My smile was as fake as the diamond necklaces around his guests’ necks. My skin

burned under their gazes, their eyes raking over me like vultures. I didn't belong here, and yet I'd forced myself into this den of wolves, my heart thundering with every passing second. I scanned the room, pretending to admire the decor. I was looking for Sergio, half-hoping, half-fearing he'd show up.

But he wasn't here.

Still, there was this feeling I couldn't shake. It pulled me back to the night I'd met the stranger, not knowing it was Sergio in disguise. The memory flashed in my mind—his voice, his eyes, the way he'd drawn me in like a moth to a flame. And now, as Sergio, nothing had changed. I had always gravitated towards him. Always loved him, even when I didn't know it was him.

"Mirella, are you alright?" Don Carlos' voice jolted me back to the present.

"I—" I fumbled, pretending to fluster as I looked down at the glass of wine in my hand. Without thinking twice, I stumbled forward just enough for the drink to spill down my dress. "Oh no! I'm so clumsy."

Don Carlos frowned, annoyed but masking it well. "Go clean yourself up."

"Thank you," I murmured, already stepping away.

I didn't look back as I moved through the crowd, weaving toward the hallway like a shadow. My heels clicked against the marble, each step quick and calculated. When I reached the door to his study, I paused just long enough to make sure no one was watching before slipping inside.

The room was darker than I expected, the faint scent of leather and smoke lingering in the air. The desk loomed in the center, its surface stacked with papers and ledgers. I didn't waste time pulling open drawers and rifling through files. My hands shook as

I scanned documents, searching for anything. A name, a location, a sign that my father was alive.

Nothing.

The seconds ticked by. My breath came faster as desperation clawed at my throat. There had to be something here. There had to—

My phone buzzed in my pause, the vibration startling me so badly that I nearly knocked a lamp off the desk. I fumbled to answer it. “Enzo?”

“Mirella,” Enzo’s voice came through the line, breathless and frantic. My heart dropped. “It was a trap. I’ve been compromised.”

“What?” I whispered, the room spinning for a second.

“It wasn’t a lead—it was a setup,” he panted. I could hear him running, the sound of gravel crunching under his feet. “They knew I was coming. I’m trying to—”

A sharp crack rang through the line. A gunshot.

The call went dead.

“Enzo?” My voice cracked as I whispered his name into the silence. “Enzo!”

I stood frozen, the phone still clutched in my hand, my ears ringing with the phantom echo of the shot. My throat felt tight, and my chest felt like it might collapse. Enzo. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t breathe.

I turned, ready to run, ready to do something, but the door opened before I could move.

Don Carlos stepped inside.

He looked at me for a long moment, his face carved from stone, his eyes dark and deadly. “I thought you might try this.”

My heart slammed against my ribs as I backed away instinctively. “I—I just got lost—”

“Don’t insult my intelligence,” he interrupted, his voice low and even, which somehow made it all the more terrifying.

My knees felt weak, but I stayed on my feet. I had to think, had to get out. “I was just—”

“Enough.” Don Carlos took another step forward, his presence filling the room like a storm cloud. “I know what you’re doing, Mirella.”

“You don’t,” I shot back, my voice shaking as I tried to hold my ground.

“Oh, but I do.” He smiled, but it was the kind that made my blood run cold. “I know you’ve been looking for your father. I know you’ve been sneaking around behind my back. I know you are The Raven, and I know about your son.”

The world tilted under my feet.

No.

Everything inside me went still. Cold terror pooled in my stomach as his words sank in. He knew. He knew about Alex. He knew about everything.

Don Carlos’ smile widened, but his eyes were empty. “You will come with me now,

Mirella. If you don't, your father and your son will die. I have them with me,"

I felt the ground fall out from under me, but I couldn't let it show. My hands balled into fists at my sides as I forced myself to stand taller and look him in the eye.

"You're bluffing," I managed, though my voice barely held.

"Do you really want to test me?" his voice dropped, soft and chilling. "We both know what I'm capable of."

For the first time, I had no words. Nothing to throw back at him. Because I knew he wasn't lying.

The warehouse smelled of rust, oil, and decay—a fitting place for shattered dreams and desperation. Don Carlos walked ahead of me. His men flanked us, their faces hard and unyielding. My hands trembled, but I clasped them together tightly, trying to summon whatever courage I had left.

The room we entered was cavernous and eerily quiet, save for the faint dripping of water somewhere in the shadows. I spotted him almost immediately.

My father.

He was slumped against the far wall, chained and frail, his skin pale and stretched too thin over his frame. His head hung low, but as we entered, he lifted it weakly. His sunken eyes met mine, and for a moment, the years fell away. I wasn't Mirella, The Raven. I was just Mirella, his daughter.

"Papi!" My voice cracked as I ran to him, the chains on my wrists clinking loudly.

The guards didn't stop me, though one snorted as if amused by the pathetic reunion. My father used what little strength he had to open his arms, and I fell into them as much as the chains allowed. His touch was weak, trembling, but it was enough.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice hoarse, barely audible. "For all of this. For everything."

Tears burned my eyes, but I blinked them away, refusing to let them fall. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

But I wasn't sure I believed that.

"You two look so sweet," Don Carlos interrupted, his tone dripping with mockery. "Such a touching reunion. Almost makes me regret what comes next."

I pulled back from my father and turned to face him, my jaw tight. He ordered his men to chain me close to my father, and they obeyed. I didn't bother fighting, "You don't have to do this."

"Oh, but I do." He stepped closer, his smile as sharp as a blade. "You thought you could outsmart me, Mirella? That I wouldn't figure out who you are? Did you really think I didn't have men in every corner of the earth?"

My heart sank, but I kept my face neutral. I couldn't let him see how much his words rattled me.

"Let my father go. He's no use to you," I said, keeping my voice steady.

Don Carlos laughed, the sound echoing off the walls. "Nice try. But you see, he's the perfect leverage. Just like your son."

My stomach twisted. The mention of Alex made my chest tighten with panic. I clenched my fists, digging my nails into my palms to keep myself grounded.

“You leave my son out of this,” I said, my voice sharper now.

He raised an eyebrow, almost amused. “That depends on you. You have something I want, Mirella. Something you’ve been keeping from me all this time. The location of the safe. Tell me where it is, and maybe, just maybe, I’ll let your father and son live.”

My heart pounded. I knew exactly what he meant. If I told him where it was, we were all as good as dead. But if I didn’t—

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, stalling for time.

His smile faded, replaced by cold calculation. “Don’t insult me, Mirella. I’m giving you a choice. Tell me, or I’ll start with your father. And then your son.”

The room felt colder. I glanced at my father, who shook his head weakly, his lips forming the word no.

“Even if I knew where it was,” I began, forcing a calm I didn’t feel, “what’s to stop you from killing us anyway?”

Don Carlos leaned against the desk, his posture relaxed but his eyes sharp. “Do you really think I’d waste all this time and effort just to kill you? No, Mirella. I want what’s in that safe. And once I have it, maybe—if you behave—I’ll let you live. After all, I’d hate to hurt someone I...” He paused, his gaze flickering over me. “...care about.”

His words made my skin crawl. “Care about?” I let out a hollow laugh. “You have a funny way of showing it.”

He ignored me, his voice taking on a softer, almost nostalgic tone. “You remind me of her, you know. Jacqueline.”

The mention of her name made me stiffen.

“She was beautiful. Fierce. Just like you.” He smirked, though there was a flicker of something in his eyes—something almost human. “I loved her. But love doesn’t always save people, does it?”

“What are you saying?” My voice was quieter now, my pulse racing.

“I killed her and made it look like she died from the sickness,” he said simply as if he were confessing to something as mundane as breaking a vase. “Not because I wanted to, but because I had to. She made choices. And those choices...” He gestured vaguely as if the answer were obvious. “They left me no other option.”

I stared at him, a mix of disgust and horror boiling in my chest. “You’re a monster.”

“And yet, here you are,” he shot back, his smirk returning. “At my mercy.”

My mind raced, trying to find a way out, a way to keep him talking. But before I could say anything, his phone buzzed. He pulled it out, glancing at the screen before answering.

“Sergio,” he greeted, his voice warm and welcoming, a stark contrast to the menace he’d just been spewing. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

He put the call on speaker, his eyes fixed on me as Sergio’s voice filled the room.

“I heard you caught The Raven,” Sergio said, his tone casual but laced with something sharp.

Don Carlos chuckled. “You heard correctly. She’s right here.”

My breath hitched as I stared at the phone, confusion and hope swirling inside me. Sergio wouldn’t betray me. He couldn’t.

“It’s about time,” Sergio continued. His words were like a knife to my chest. “Mirella thought she was smart, but we outsmarted her.”

I blinked, the room spinning for a moment. What was he saying? What was happening?

My throat tightened, a lump forming that I couldn’t swallow. Sergio’s voice, the one that had always felt like safety, was now something foreign, cold.

I had thought I was smart. But now, I wasn’t sure what to think at all.

SERGIO

Ryan paced the length of my office, phone clutched tightly in his hand. His usual calm was replaced with agitation, which meant bad news. I leaned back in my chair, trying to keep my focus sharp despite the restless energy clawing at my chest.

“You’re driving me crazy, Ryan. Either sit down or tell me what’s going on.”

Ryan stopped, turned toward me, and exhaled sharply. “The contact you asked me to call? He found something. It’s about Mirella’s father.”

I sat up straight, the tension in my shoulders snapping into sharp focus. “Where?”

“He’s been held in one of Don Carlos’s warehouses. For years, Sergio.” Ryan’s voice was tight and clipped as if he were holding back anger.

The news hit me harder than I’d expected. Years. Mirella had been searching, hoping, and Don Carlos—no, that bastard—had him all along. My fingers curled into fists, the blood roaring in my ears.

“Get me everything you know about that warehouse.” My voice was low and calm, but I could feel the storm brewing inside me.

Ryan hesitated, shifting uncomfortably. “That’s not all. My source says something else.”

I stared at him. “Spit it out.”

Ryan's jaw tightened. "Don Carlos might know Mirella is The Raven."

The words were a punch to the gut. My mind blanked for a second before anger snapped me back into focus. I stood up, the chair scraping loudly against the hardwood floor.

"This is bad, so bad."

Ryan shook his head. "We don't know yet, but Don Carlos is coordinating an attack on her men. He's moving quickly, which means—"

"Which means Mirella's in trouble," I finished for him.

I ran a hand through my hair, pacing now because sitting was no longer an option. This wasn't a coincidence. Don Carlos was too calculated for that. Mirella's been playing a dangerous game for a long time, but if he truly knew who she was, this wasn't just about revenge—it was about control.

I turned to Ryan. "Call your contact. Have him dig deeper. I want eyes on every one of Don Carlos's men by the end of the hour."

Ryan nodded, already dialing. I grabbed my phone off the desk, my thoughts spinning as I scrolled through my contacts. Mirella wasn't at home. She must be at the engagement, and she wasn't answering her phone earlier. That pit in my stomach grew deeper.

"Where is she?" I muttered to myself, my thumb hovering over a number I hadn't called in weeks.

Ryan glanced up. "You think she's at the engagement?"

“If she’s not there, she’s somewhere worse,” I said flatly. “And I need to know, now.”

I hit call. The line rang twice before a familiar voice answered. It was one of my allies—someone who’d been forced to play nice with Don Carlos but never truly bent to him.

“Is she there?” I didn’t bother with pleasantries.

The ally paused just long enough to irritate me. “Who?”

“You know who.”

“No,” he replied carefully. “Haven’t seen her in a minute. Why?”

That answer didn’t ease me. In fact, it confirmed what I already feared. Mirella wouldn’t miss this event unless something—or someone—stopped her.

I leaned against the desk, lowering my voice. “Listen to me. Are you and your men ready?”

He didn’t respond immediately, and I could almost hear him weighing my words. There were rules in this game, and alliances were fragile. Asking that question meant I was stirring the pot.

“Why do you ask?”

I gave a humorless laugh. “Because I’m tired of pretending we’re not all suffocating under Don Carlos’s boot. And I know you are too.”

Silence stretched. I could feel the weight of it, the years of bitterness and quiet

resentment. Men like Don Carlos ruled through fear, but fear only worked until people had nothing left to lose.

“Tell me you’re ready,” I pressed, my voice firm now.

The ally exhaled, slow and heavy. “We’ve always been ready to get out of the clutches of that tyrant.”

I gripped the phone tighter, my pulse finally starting to calm. Good. Finally.

“We move when I say,” I said, steel in my tone. “Stay sharp, and don’t trust anyone outside your men. I’ll call you when it’s time.”

The line clicked dead, and I lowered the phone, my mind already racing with the next steps.

Ryan watched me carefully. “They’re in?”

“They’re in.” I straightened, exhaling slowly as I pushed down the rage boiling beneath my calm surface. “Mirella’s in danger, Ryan. Don Carlos is tightening the noose, and I need to find her before he finishes the job.”

Ryan rubbed a hand over his face. “Sergio, you’re walking into a trap. You know that, right?”

“Of course I know that,” I snapped and then softened. “But what choice do I have? Mirella’s father is barely holding on, and now Don Carlos might have her, too. If I sit here doing nothing, I may as well hand them over myself.”

Ryan sighed but didn’t argue further. He knew me too well by now.

I moved toward the door, grabbing my jacket on the way. “Call the men. I want every resource we have focused on finding Mirella. No excuses.”

Ryan nodded, already pulling out his phone. “What are you going to do?”

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob. “I’m going to remind Don Carlos that no one gets to touch what’s mine.”

And if I had to burn his entire empire to the ground to do it, so be it.

Mirella’s house looked like a war zone. Furniture overturned, glass shattered, and signs of a struggle in every corner of the living room. I stepped carefully over the remnants of what used to be a vase, scanning for anything that might tell me what happened here. My heart was pounding, and not just because of the mess. It was too quiet. The kind of quiet that sets your teeth on edge and makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. I knew Mirella wouldn’t be here, but I came to get Dahlia and Alex.

No Alex. No Dahlia. That pit in my stomach, the one I’d been trying to ignore since Ryan’s call, was now a full-blown chasm.

I crouched near the broken coffee table, picking up a small stuffed bear. It belonged to Alex. He never went anywhere without it.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath, clenching the toy in my hand.

This wasn’t random. This wasn’t a burglary or some street-level thug breaking in. No, this had Don Carlos written all over it.

I straightened, tossing the bear onto the couch. Time wasn't on my side. If Don Carlos had taken them, I couldn't afford to sit around playing detective.

I reached for my phone, my fingers trembling slightly as I dialed the number I knew by heart. My father's number.

It rang twice before he answered, his voice smooth and authoritative as always.

"Sergio. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I forced a smile into my tone. "I heard you caught The Raven,"

Don Carlos chuckled. "You heard correctly. She's right here."

My heart almost skipped a beat, but I managed to keep it steady.

"It's about time. Mirella thought she was smart, but we outsmarted her."

I paused. I knew my father too well to know if I wanted him to let me in, I needed to sell this role to him.

"I started suspecting her some time ago," I began, keeping my voice steady and careful. "Little things here and there. Missing meetings. Strange calls. But I didn't have proof."

"And now?"

I let out a short, humorless laugh. "Now, I know you are right about her. The Raven, Father? It's possible."

He made a sound of approval, the kind of sound he used to make when I aced a test as

a kid. It grated on me.

“So, you’ve finally started using that brain of yours,” he said.

I swallowed the insult and pressed on. “I thought I’d use this opportunity to prove myself to you. Let me handle it, Father. Let me take care of Mirella.”

The line went quiet again, and for a moment, I thought I’d pushed too hard. Then, his voice came through, sharp and decisive.

“You want to prove yourself, Sergio?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Come to the old warehouse in Westchester. I’ll give you the address.”

I barely stopped myself from sighing in relief. Instead, I grabbed a pen from the floor and scribbled the address he rattled off onto the back of my hand.

“Consider this a test,” he added, his tone dripping with condescension. “Don’t disappoint me.”

The line went dead, and I lowered the phone, staring at the address on the paper like it might combust in my palm.

A test. That’s what he thought this was. My father’s games had always been cruel, but this wasn’t about me proving myself to him. This was about Mirella, Alex, Dahlia—and getting them out alive.

I shoved the phone back into my pocket and glanced around the room one last time, searching for any clue I might have missed. But the house gave me nothing, just more

questions than answers.

I headed for the door, and a thousand thoughts fought for space in my head. What condition would I find them in? Was Mirella even still alive? And Alex—my son.

The thought of him in Don Carlos's hands was enough to make my blood boil. My father had always been ruthless, but going after a child? That was a new low, even for him.

I stepped outside. My car was parked down the street, and as I walked toward it, I made a silent promise.

This ends tonight.

One way or another, I was getting them back. And if my father thought I was playing his game, he was in for a rude awakening.

The air inside the warehouse was cold and eerie. The kind that prickled at your skin and made every breath feel like a risk. Don Carlos stood tall, his figure backlit by the flickering overhead bulb. His voice cut through the silence as he turned toward Mr. Gallo, who was chained beside Mirella.

“Choose, old man,” Don Carlos commanded. “Your daughter, or the location of the safe.”

Mr. Gallo's face was pale, his features lined with exhaustion and pain. But his eyes—they burned with something fierce. I knew that look. A father's desperation. I had seen it before, years ago, in a mirror.

“I told you, don’t tell him anything!” Mirella’s voice broke through the stillness. Her arms pulled against the chains holding her, but it was no use. Her strength, though fierce, wasn’t enough to break steel.

I stayed quiet, leaning against a rusted support beam, the gun in my hand feeling heavier by the second. My father’s eyes darted to me, watching and waiting. Testing me. I kept my expression neutral, cold even. No mischief, no emotion, no tells. I tried to avoid eye contact with Mirella because I didn’t want to risk breaking character.

Mr. Gallo’s voice cracked when he finally spoke. “It’s behind the bookshelf. In my study.”

Mirella’s eyes widened in disbelief. “No! You can’t—”

Don Carlos’s laughter was sharp, cutting through the room. “Behind a bookshelf?” He shook his head, pacing slowly. “All this time... under my nose. How amusing. I suppose I overestimated you, Gallo. Too obvious. Too simple.”

I could feel the shift in the room as Don Carlos stopped pacing. His gaze landed on me, a glint of malice in his eyes. He gestured toward the prisoners with a casual wave.

“Once my men confirm the safe is there, Sergio, kill them all.”

I stood straighter, my heart racing, though I kept my face unreadable. “All of them?”

“Yes, all of them,” he snapped. “They’re of no use to me now.”

I nodded, my grip tightening around the gun. The warehouse felt too quiet, too still. Mirella’s eyes met mine, and for a moment, there was nothing but silent desperation between us. She didn’t plead or beg. But her eyes—they asked the question she

couldn't say out loud.

I stepped forward, the sound of my boots echoing off the concrete. Don Carlos's back was to me now as he barked orders to one of his men to get his car ready to go check the safe.

This was my moment.

The first shot rang out, the sound deafening in the confined space. Don Carlos staggered forward, clutching his arm, his face twisted in shock. Before he could turn, the second shot hit his leg, and he crumpled to the ground.

The room exploded into chaos.

Don Carlos looked up at me, his hand pressed to his bleeding arm, his expression a mix of pain and disbelief. "What... what are you doing?"

"Ending this," I said, stepping closer. "Your reign of terror stops here."

His voice turned cold, his eyes narrowing. "You think this changes anything? Men! Kill him!"

No one moved.

Don Carlos's gaze darted around the room, confusion creeping into his features. His men stood still, their guns lowered. One by one, they stepped back, their loyalty shifting right before his eyes.

"I say kill him," he barked at them, but no one moved.

"They are also tired of your reign, father."

Realization dawned on his face.

“You... you’ve been recruiting them?” His voice was laced with disbelief, almost a laugh.

I crouched in front of him, pulling something from under my coat. A mask. The mask I’d worn during that wedding. I dropped it on the floor in front of him, letting it land at his feet.

His eyes widened, his breathing uneven. “It can’t be...”

“Oh, it can,” I said, my voice low. “It was me that day. I was the one who shot you. And now I’ve done it again. Only this time, I’m not running. This time, I’m finishing what I started.”

Don Carlos tried to push himself up, but his strength was failing. “You think you’re better than me, Sergio?” His voice cracked with anger. “You’re just like me.”

“No,” I said, standing over him. “I’m nothing like you. And I’m going to make sure you rot for the rest of your miserable life.”

I pulled out my phone and dialed. The call was quick, and the message was brief. “You can pick him up now. Westchester. Send everyone.”

Don Carlos’s eyes widened in shock as the realization hit him.

“You called the police?”

“Enjoy prison, Father.”

The sound of sirens grew louder in the distance, cutting through the heavy silence.

I turned to Mirella and her father, who were still chained. Mirella's face was unreadable, and her emotions were a storm I couldn't quite place. I moved quickly, releasing them both from their bonds.

The moment Mirella was free, she grabbed my arm, her voice trembling. "Alex. Dahlia. Where are they?"

I gave her a small smile. "They're safe. Ryan has them in the other room."

Relief washed over her face, her shoulders sagging as she exhaled.

Mr. Gallo, still weak but standing, gripped my arm. "Thank you," he said, his voice heavy with gratitude.

I nodded, but my mind was already elsewhere. This wasn't over yet. There was still one last thing I needed to do.

The police arrived moments later, swarming the warehouse and taking Don Carlos into custody. He glared at me as they dragged him away, but his threats fell on deaf ears.

I watched him go, and everything felt light. Years of pain, years of abuse, years of guilt, and years of anguish all came flushing down.

I felt peace, a peace that came with justice. I would make sure he never saw the outside of a cell again. For Mirella. For Alex. For Jacqueline. For all of us.

MIRELLA

The house was quieter than it had been in weeks, but there was a hum of life that filled the air. It wasn't the kind of stillness I'd grown used to—the suffocating silence of being alone with my thoughts. This was different. This was the kind of quiet that came after storms. Heavy, but alive.

I leaned against the doorframe of Alex's room, watching as Dahlia sat with him, showing him how to fold paper into what I assumed were supposed to be animals. Alex's laugh was loud and unrestrained, a sound I don't think I'd ever quite heard before.

“You're terrible at this,” Alex teased, holding up a crumpled piece of paper.

Dahlia gave him a dramatic scowl. “That's supposed to be a swan! Use your imagination, kid!”

I smiled. Dahlia had kept Alex safe when Don Carlos's men came, never leaving his side. She'd done more than I could have asked for, more than I could have done myself.

I was used to doing things on my own and fighting my battles alone. It was a lesson life had forced on me, time and time again. Yet here I was, surrounded by people who had risked everything for me and Alex. Dahlia, bruised but unyielding, sitting cross-legged on the floor as though nothing had happened. Ryan was still pacing downstairs, the tension in his shoulders barely easing even now. Enzo walked around like his injuries were nothing, even though I knew the bullet had grazed him.

They'd all gone out of their way to make sure we were safe. And Sergio—Sergio had done what I'd thought impossible. He had brought down Don Carlos.

I didn't know how to feel about it yet. Grateful wasn't enough. Overwhelmed was closer, but even that didn't quite cover it.

"Mama?"

Alex's voice broke through my thoughts. He was standing now, staring at me with those big, curious eyes. I stepped into the room, my hand instinctively brushing over his hair.

"Are you okay, Mama?"

"I am," I said, though the weight of everything still sat heavily on my shoulders. "And so are you."

He grinned, the gap in his teeth showing as he did. "Dahlia says I can make a better swan than her."

"You probably can," I teased, earning a mock-offended gasp from Dahlia.

"Traitor," she muttered, but her smile gave her away.

There was still so much to do. But for now, I wanted Alex to have this moment, this lightness.

Later, when he was curled up, I took him to meet his grandfather.

We'd set up the makeshift hospital in the living room. It had been his wish—no hospitals, no sterile white rooms. Just home. The doctors came and went, doing what

they could. Nurses stayed, keeping him comfortable, but it was his home now.

My father looked older than I remembered, not just in years but in wear. Five years of captivity had stolen so much from him, but there was life in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

When I led Alex into the room, my father's expression softened in a way I'd never seen before.

"Is this him?" His voice was quiet, almost reverent.

"This is Alex," I said, placing a hand on Alex's shoulder.

Alex hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward, his usual bravado faltering under the weight of the moment. "Are you my grandpa?"

"I am," my father said, his voice breaking slightly. "I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to meet you."

Alex tilted his head, studying him the way only a child could. Then he grinned. "You're not as scary as Mama says you are."

I let out a laugh, shaking my head. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to," Alex shot back, earning a laugh from my father.

For the first time in years, I saw him smile. A real, genuine smile. He pulled Alex closer, his hand trembling as he ruffled his hair.

"You've got her fire," he said softly. "That's good. You'll need it."

Alex leaned into him without hesitation, and I felt something inside me loosen.

Later, when Alex had gone back to his room, my father and I sat in the quiet of the makeshift hospital. The machines beeped softly around us, but it felt almost peaceful.

“I thought I was going to die in that warehouse,” he said, his voice low. “For years, I thought that was how it would end—alone and forgotten.”

“You’re not alone,” I said, my voice firm.

He nodded slowly, his eyes misty. “I’m grateful, Mirella. For you. For Alex. For this chance I thought that I’d never get.”

We sat in silence for a moment before he spoke again. “I need to apologize to you.”

“You don’t—”

“I do,” he interrupted, his tone resolute. “For forcing you into that marriage with Don Carlos. I thought I was securing our future, but all I did was chain you to a monster.”

I didn’t know what to say. The words caught in my throat.

“I thought I was doing what was best,” he continued. “But I see now how wrong I was. I see the weight you’ve carried because of my choices.”

I reached for his hand, squeezing it tightly. “I forgave you a long time ago, Papi. All I wanted was to get you back. That’s all that ever mattered to me.”

He looked at me, his expression softening. “And now?”

“Now, I’m just glad you’re here,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

His grip on my hand tightened. "I'll make it up to you, Mirella. I swear it."

"You don't have to," I said, a small smile playing on my lips. "But if you really want to, you can start by letting Alex teach you how to fold a swan. Apparently, he's an expert."

He laughed, the sound filling the room in a way that made it feel a little warmer.

The sound of the front door opening pulled me from my thoughts. My pulse quickened as I walked toward the hallway, and there he was. Sergio. His shoulders were slumped, his face tired but alive. He looked at me, and before I could say anything, he crossed the room and pulled me into his arms.

I hadn't realized how much I needed the weight of him holding me. The warmth of someone who had seen every ugly part of me and stayed anyway.

My hands gripped the back of his shirt tightly as I buried my face into his chest. The tears came fast, hot, and without warning. It wasn't the kind of crying that came with sobs or gasps for air. It was quieter than that. Just a steady stream of emotion I couldn't hold back anymore.

He held me tighter, his chin resting lightly on top of my head. "You don't have to say anything," he murmured. "I'd do this and more for you."

I pulled back, looking up at him through blurry eyes. "I don't know how to thank you, Sergio."

His hand brushed against my cheek, wiping away a tear. "You don't have to."

But I did. He had been my lifeline through all of this, even when I hadn't realized it.

We moved to the couch, and I tucked my legs under me as he sat close, his body angled toward mine. He looked like he wanted to say something, but the words seemed stuck.

"Just say it," I urged gently, my voice still shaky. "Whatever it is."

His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "I owe you an apology, Mirella. A real one. For everything."

"You don't owe me—"

"I do," he interrupted, his eyes locking with mine. "I should have told you who I was the moment I saw you again. There's no excuse for that. I thought the mask would protect you, but all it did was build a wall between us."

He paused, running a hand through his hair. "I thought keeping my distance would make things easier, and that, maybe, it would keep you safe. But it was a lie I told myself because I was afraid. I didn't know if you'd forgive me for being part of his world."

His voice broke slightly on the last word, and my chest ached.

I reached out, my fingers brushing against his. "I don't blame you for the mask, Sergio. I really don't. It's what kept Don Carlos blind to what you were doing. And in the end, it was exactly what we needed to take him down."

He shook his head. "That doesn't make it right."

"No, it doesn't," I admitted. "But none of this has been black and white, has it?"

We've both made choices we thought were for the best, even when they weren't."

His brows furrowed. "What are you saying?"

I let out a slow breath, my hand pulling back to rest in my lap. "I'm saying I'm no saint either. I lied about not being Alex's mother. I hid who I was as The Raven. I told myself it was to protect him, but if I'm being honest, part of it was because I didn't completely trust you."

His expression faltered, and I rushed to continue.

"It wasn't because of anything you did, Sergio. You never gave me a reason to doubt you. It was me and my fear. My habit of keeping people at arm's length because it was safer that way."

The silence felt like we were both sorting through the pieces of ourselves we hadn't dared to confront before now.

He reached for my hand, his fingers curling around mine. "No more masks," he said firmly. "Not for you. Not for me. No more hiding, Mirella. No more pretending we're anything but what we are."

"And what are we?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

His thumb brushed against the back of my hand. "We're two people who've been through hell and back, and we're still standing. Together. If that's not worth fighting for, I don't know what is."

I felt my lips tremble as I nodded. "No more masks," I repeated. "From now on, we're transparent in everything, even when it's hard."

“Especially when it’s hard,” he agreed, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

My eyes searched his, looking for the catch, the hesitation, but there wasn’t any. He was all in, and for the first time in a long time, so was I.

“I love you, Mirella,” he said, the words coming out steady and sure.

It felt like everything in me stilled for a moment, the weight of his words settling over me. I reached up, my hand cupping his face.

“I love you too, Sergio.”

I let those words settle in me, warm and grounding. But there was something else, something I couldn’t put off any longer. “Sergio,” I started, my voice catching slightly, “are you ready to meet him? Alex, I mean.”

His head tilted, his eyes softening in a way that made my chest ache. “Ready?” he repeated, his voice quiet. “I’ve been waiting for this moment since the day I found out. Nothing would make me happier.”

For a second, I couldn’t breathe. His answer hit me with so much tenderness that I could only nod, swallowing back the lump in my throat.

I rose from the couch, motioning for him to follow. My heart pounded as we walked down the hallway, each step feeling heavier with emotion. At Alex’s door, I paused, my hand hovering over the handle.

“Sergio,” I whispered, looking back at him. “He’s a little shy at first, but once he warms up, he’s got the biggest heart. He’s smart, too. Smarter than me most days.”

Sergio smiled, his expression filled with something I couldn't quite name. "Sounds like he gets that from his mother."

I shook my head, my lips curving upward despite the nervousness bubbling in my chest. Pushing the door open slowly, I peeked inside. Alex was awake now, sitting cross-legged on the bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Hey, sweetheart," I said, stepping in. "There's someone here who wants to meet you."

Alex blinked up at me, then at Sergio, who had stopped just inside the doorway. He looked at me, his little face excited. "Uncle!"

I sat on the edge of the bed, brushing a hand through his messy hair. "Sweetheart, he is not your uncle," I said softly, my voice steady but full of meaning. "He's... well, he's your father."

Alex's eyes widened, his small hands clutching the blanket tightly. "My dad?" His voice was barely above a whisper, full of wonder and caution all at once.

Sergio knelt on the floor, bringing himself to Alex's eye level. "Yeah, buddy," he said gently. "I'm your dad. And I've been waiting a long time to tell you."

Alex stared at him, his eyes flicking between me and Sergio. "You're really my dad?"

Sergio nodded. "I am. And if it's okay with you, I'd like to get to know you. Maybe we could do some fun stuff together. Like... we could play dinosaurs like the other day, and I heard you're really good at drawing."

Alex's grip on the blanket loosened slightly. "I am," he said, a small hint of pride creeping into his voice. "I can draw anything, even the dinosaurs."

Sergio grinned, his eyes lighting up. “That’s awesome. You’ll have to show me sometime. Maybe we can draw one together.”

Alex’s lips twitched, almost like he was trying not to smile, but he couldn’t help himself. “Okay,” he said shyly.

The warmth in Sergio’s expression was enough to melt any remaining fear I had. He reached out carefully as if he didn’t want to scare Alex. “Can I shake your hand?” he asked.

Alex hesitated, then slowly extended his tiny hand. When their hands met, I felt the tears welling up again.

“You’ve got a strong grip,” Sergio said, his tone playful but full of admiration. “I think you might be stronger than me.”

Alex giggled, his shyness fading just a little. “No way. You’re way bigger.”

Sergio chuckled, his thumb brushing lightly over Alex’s knuckles before letting go. “Big doesn’t always mean strong, you know. But I think you’ve got both.”

I watched them, my heart full in a way it hadn’t been in years. For so long, it had just been Alex and me, our little world built on quiet strength and fierce love. Now, seeing Sergio kneeling there, his every word and gesture filled with care, I knew our world had just gotten a little bigger.

Alex tilted his head, looking at Sergio curiously. “Do you like pizza?”

Sergio leaned in, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Like it? I love it. Especially with lots of cheese.”

Alex's smile grew. "Me too! But no olives. Olives are gross."

"Agreed," Sergio said, his face serious. "No olives. Ever."

I laughed softly, wiping my eyes. "Looks like you two are going to get along just fine."

Sergio glanced at me, his gaze full of gratitude and something deeper. "I think so, too."

Alex shifted on the bed, leaning closer to Sergio. "Do you want to see my dinosaur drawings now?"

Sergio nodded, his face lighting up. "I'd love to."

Alex scrambled off the bed to grab his sketchpad, and I stood back, watching them. My heart swelled as the weight of years of fear and uncertainty lifted, piece by piece.

For the first time in a long time, everything felt right.

MIRELLA

The door clicked softly as I pulled it shut behind me, Alex's peaceful breathing still lingering in my ears. The house was quiet now, soothing and heavy all at once. I turned to find Sergio already close—so close that I could feel his warmth brushing against me.

His voice came low, a whisper that sent a tremor straight through me. "I want you tonight, all of you."

My heart stuttered, every muscle in my body tensing at the sound of those words. His gaze pinned me in place, dark and steady, searching my face for something I couldn't name. I felt my breath catch in my throat as his lips curved into a slow, knowing smile, one that made my knees weaken. He knew. He always knew.

I didn't move as his hand reached up, fingertips grazing the curve of my cheek. It was such a soft, tender touch, yet it carried all the weight of what he'd just said. My skin warmed under his palm, a familiar ache building inside me as he held me there, like I was something sacred. His thumb brushed my lower lip—barely a touch, but enough to make me shiver.

"You want this too," he murmured, his voice rougher this time, more certain.

I couldn't answer—not with words, anyway. I nodded instead, barely perceptible, but enough for him. His other hand found my waist, his palm pressing against me, pulling me closer until I was flush against him. Every inch of me felt like it was burning, my pulse pounding in my ears.

Sergio leaned in, his lips hovering just above mine. The anticipation nearly unraveled me. His breath teased my skin as he whispered, “I want to make love to you tonight.”

The words undid me completely. They were spoken with such raw honesty that my heart clenched, and I could barely stand under the weight of it. There was no hesitation, no hiding—just him and what he wanted, what we wanted.

“Say yes, Mirella,” he whispered, his voice a little rough, his lips brushing mine as he spoke. “Say you’re mine tonight.”

I looked up into his eyes—those eyes that had always seen me and loved me, no matter who I was or what I carried. And there, in that moment, there wasn’t a doubt left in me.

“Yes,” I whispered, the word coming out like a breath.

The smile that spread across his face was slow, “I will make love to you in every way possible tonight,”

His words settled over me, warm and comforting. I leaned into him, resting my forehead against his chest. His heartbeat was steady, and I could lose myself in it.

When I looked up, his face was so close to mine that I could feel the warmth of his breath. His eyes searched mine, and then, slowly, he leaned down, capturing my lips in a kiss.

It wasn’t rushed or demanding. It was gentle like the first rays of sunlight breaking over the horizon. His lips moved against mine with a tenderness that unraveled me.

I let myself sink into him, my arms wrapping around his neck. His hands found my waist, anchoring me as though he was afraid I’d slip away.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathing harder. I wasn't sure I could restrain myself.

"Sergio," I murmured, my voice unsteady.

He pulled back just enough to look at me. "What is it?"

"I don't want to hold back anymore." My confession felt raw, but it was the truth. "I don't want to be playing it safe."

His gaze softened, and he cupped my face in his hands. "You don't have to. I've got you."

The sincerity in his voice undid me. I leaned up, finding his lips again, this time with more urgency. His hands tightened on my waist, and he pressed me closer.

He held my face tenderly, his eyes scanning my face as if memorizing every detail.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice husky.

I felt a blush creep up my neck, but I didn't look away. "So are you."

He chuckled, low and deep, before pulling me into his arms again. His hands slid down my back, tracing the curve of my spine. My fingers found their way into his hair, tugging gently as our kisses deepened.

Slowly, I felt his hand looking for the means to feel my bare skin. He undid the zipper of my black dress, and I stepped away from it, sensually aware of his eyes on me, devouring every inch of my skin. Clothes fell away, piece by piece until there was nothing between us but skin and the electric charge that seemed to hum in the air.

Sergio's touch was reverent, his hands exploring every inch of me as though he was discovering something sacred. I mirrored him, my hands trailing over the hard planes of his chest and the lines of his shoulders.

He walked to my dressing table and made space on it. He lifted me up, and I wrapped my arms and legs around him. Sergio set me on the table gently and took a few steps backward.

"I cannot get enough of you, Mirella," Sergio confessed, a rueful smile on his lips.

I sat on the table, my eyes on him. He gently squeezed my breasts in one hand and kissed me deeply, his lips exploring the depth of my lips. I wrapped my legs across his back and pulled him towards me.

"I love you, Mirella," Sergio said, his eyes shut, his voice sincere and needy.

"I love you, too, Sergio," I confessed, holding nothing back.

Sergio kissed my forehead, eyelids, and the base of my neck. His tongue slid down to my perky nipples, begging for his touch. He grabbed my nipples with his lips and nibbled gently. I saw the stars, moaning, needing more.

He slid his fingers into my deep sea, his lips on my nipple and his fingers inside, thrusting in and out, building momentum. I shut my eyes, momentarily lost in the pleasure coursing down my being. He added another finger gently, going in and out, his fingers exploring my pleasure spot. I held his head and buckled under the sheer pleasure coursing inside of me.

Sergio paused briefly, his eyes dark and shiny. He bent down and kissed my clitoris, his fingers still working within me.

“Oh my!” I screamed, lost in the things he was doing to me.

He used his tongue to stroke gently my clit while also thrusting with his hands. I shut my eyes and writhed in orgasmic pleasure as my body thrashed around, dripping warm wetness all over the table. Sergio gathered me in his arms and laid me gently on the bed. He smiled boyishly, and I could have sworn he looked too innocent for the things he was doing to me.

He stroked his cock and slowly parted my legs. I watched him guide himself into the pool of wetness between my legs. Face to face, we stared at each other as he thrust in and out of me.

It was slow and deliberate, and every movement was a testament to the connection we shared.

“Mirella,” He whispered my name like a prayer, his voice thick with emotion.

“Sergio,” I answered with soft gasps and murmured promises.

He kissed me deeply, and I widened my legs, needing more of him. He wrapped his arms around me and began thrusting deeply into me. I saw stars and moaned loudly, screaming his name as he rammed harder into me, each thrust hitting the spot of my deepest pleasure.

Twice, he had made me cum. I decided to give him the ride of his life. I laid on top of him and spread my hands on his muscled chest, smiling and stroking his nipples.

“What are you doing?” He asked, his eyes suspicious yet thrilled by what I was doing.

“Returning the favor,” I murmured seductively.

I set my lips on his nipples and slowly began to suckle. I heard him gasp, and he smiled as he shut his eyes. I had my lips on his nipples and slowly moved my hands to stroke his hardened manhood.

“What are you doing to me?” Sergio whispered, his voice thick.

He tried to hold me, but I raised his hand to fondle my breasts, and with my eyes fastened into his, I guided his cock into me. Slowly, I began to move my waist, thrusting in and out. I felt him inside as each thrust hit squarely into me. I shut my eyes and increased the tempo of each thrust with a feverish urgency.

“Ohhh...” I screamed, my voice a distant sound in my ears as colors of pleasure clouded my senses.

Sergio held my waist up and rammed into me equally, each of us lost in the pleasure bursting through us.

I needed more of him inside me. I wanted him deep within me. I quickly came down and lay on all fours, silently begging for more.

Sergio slid a finger or two in and out a couple of times and slowly entered with his manhood. He came in and out, teasing me, wanting me to beg. I didn't care. I was shameless at this point.

“How bad do you want me, baby?” He teased. His husky voice felt like added fuel to the fire of pleasure raging within me.

“I want you, Sergio,” I pleaded, “very, very badly.”

“Oh yeah?” He teased further. “Then let me give it to you.”

Sergio held my hands together above my head like the prisoner I was and thrust in deeply. Then, he turned his cock from side to side. I felt him hitting the sweetest spots in me. I bit the pillow to stifle the screams of pleasure trapped in my throat and thrashed as he increased the tempo of each thrust. I felt him go still with a few spasms of pleasure, and with a contented sigh, he held me in his arms.

I blinked, shocked, my toes tingling in the aftermath of what we had just done. I could not believe Sergio made me go again and again with him. Each adventure felt new and exhilarating. We lay tangled in each other, the room filled with the sound of our breathing. Sergio's arm was draped over me, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my skin.

"I can't believe we did all that," I confessed, my eyes wide with shock.

Sergio laughed, his voice low and intoxicatingly sexy, "There's a lot more from where that came from."

I hit his chest playfully and laughed, "Don't you get tired?"

"Of you?" He asked with feigned surprise, "never, Mirella. With you, I can do this all day."

We both laughed, still tangled with each other. I had so much to be thankful for, and this moment felt like a place I would always love to fall back on with Sergio.

"I love you," he said quietly, breaking the silence.

I turned to look at him, my heart swelling at the vulnerability in his expression. "I love you, too."

His smile was soft and warm. He pulled me closer, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

I rested my head on his chest, listened to the soft thud of his heartbeat, and felt his hands stroke my tangled hair. I felt the soothing lull of sleep creep over me, and as I drifted slowly into its welcoming arms, I felt peaceful and secure.

Everything about Sergio felt wholesome. I felt whole.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm

Nine months. It's been nine months since my life flipped itself over and since the shadows of my past were dragged into the light. Don Carlos was locked away and sentenced to three consecutive life terms. Sergio, against all odds, had managed to pull most of the business into something respectable—well, as respectable as it gets in a world like ours. A world where “clean” and “safe” didn't mean innocent. But we kept it as safe as we could, for us, for Alex, and for the future.

Enzo still liked to remind me of his “heroic near-death experience” every chance he got, dramatically clutching his side where the bullet had grazed him. He'd healed well, though I suspected the dramatics were for Dahlia's benefit more than anything. Dahlia, of course, rolled her eyes but played along. Some things never change.

Tonight, though, none of that mattered. For once, the weight of our lives—the danger, the scars—felt far away. Sergio had planned something, something so out of character it made me nervous. He'd been tight-lipped about it for days, only dropping hints with that insufferable half-smile of his.

“Trust me, Mirella,” he'd said earlier that morning. “You're going to love it.”

And somehow, I did.

The restaurant he brought me to overlooked the bay. It was quiet and intimate, the kind of place where the world seemed to pause just for you. I sat there, watching him across the table as he smiled at me like he held the secret to everything.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I muttered, fiddling with the stem of my wine glass.

“Like what?”

“Like you know something I don’t.”

He chuckled, leaning back in his chair. “Maybe I do.”

Typical. He’s always leaving me guessing.

It wasn’t until dessert came that I noticed something odd. One by one, people began trickling in—Enzo, Dahlia, my father, even Alex holding Ryan’s hand. I blinked, confused, as I watched them take their places around us, their faces full of anticipation.

“What’s going on?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

And then Sergio stood, his chair scraping softly against the stone patio. My heart caught in my throat as he walked toward me, pulling something from his pocket.

Oh no.

Oh yes.

He stopped right in front of me, his dark eyes warm and steady as they met mine. Slowly, he sank to one knee.

“Mirella,” he said, his voice rich and calm, though I could see his fingers tremble ever so slightly. “From the moment you stormed back into my life, I knew I’d never be the same. You are strength and fire, stubbornness and grace, and everything I didn’t know I needed.”

The tears were already burning my eyes, and my hand shot up to cover my mouth.

He pulled open a small velvet box, revealing a ring so beautiful it took my breath away. “Mirella, will you marry me?”

It wasn’t the ring or the words that undid me. It was the look on his face—hopeful, certain, and so full of love it knocked down every wall I’d ever built.

I nodded quickly, tears spilling as I laughed through the sobs. “Yes, Sergio. Yes, of course!”

He slid the ring onto my finger, and when he stood to pull me into his arms, the world disappeared. I didn’t hear the applause or Enzo’s whistling. All I felt was Sergio, his arms steady around me and his heartbeat against mine.

For the first time in forever, I let myself believe it. This was real. And it was ours.

The day of the wedding was surreal. It felt like something out of a dream, or maybe even a movie, one where everything was perfect and nothing could go wrong. My father walked me down the aisle, his arm firm and steady under mine. He looked at me with so much pride as though I had somehow become the woman he always hoped I would be. I hadn’t always felt like that in his eyes, but today, for this moment, I saw it—his love, his forgiveness, and his hope for my future.

Ryan stood at the front, his face radiating joy for us. Dahlia, Enzo, and Alex all gathered beside him, each one playing a part in the beauty of the day. I could hardly believe it was happening. The people who mattered most were here, supporting us and witnessing the start of a new chapter. The moment felt sacred and as if everything I had been through—everything we had survived—led to this one perfect second.

Sergio waited for me at the altar, his eyes focused on mine as I walked toward him. The world seemed to fade away as I looked at him. I thought of everything we had overcome, the secrets we had kept, the masks we wore, the lies and the truth. But most of all, I thought about how he had saved me—not just once, but countless times.

Today, in this moment, we were finally standing here together, ready to say the words that would change everything.

I reached him, and he took my hands in his, the warmth of his touch grounding me. There was a tenderness in his eyes, a love that had grown over the years through the good and the bad. I felt it in my chest, swelling up until I couldn't breathe.

We were both nervous, I could tell. But I could also see the calm behind his nerves—the quiet confidence that we were making the right decision. The vows, however, were not what I expected.

Sergio stood tall, his voice unwavering as he began. “Mirella, from the moment I met you, I knew you were special. You were the girl I helped when you were stuck in a tree, and I was the boy who couldn't get you out fast enough. I've loved you since then, and I love you still. You're the only woman I've ever loved, the one I'll always love, no matter what.”

My heart clenched. His words were like a balm to my soul, healing everything that had been broken. He had loved me for so long, even when I didn't know it.

Sergio paused for a moment, his eyes glistening. “I would do anything for you. And that's how I know what we have is real. What we have is something that will never die, no matter what life throws at us.”

I was crying now, my face wet with tears, but it didn't matter. Because the truth was there in the rawness of his words. He had done more than just take a bullet for me. He had given me a love I didn't know I deserved, a love that had always been there, even when we were on opposite sides.

When it was my turn to speak, I looked at him, feeling the weight of everything I wanted to say but couldn't find the words for. Instead, I began with the truth.

“People always joke about taking a bullet for someone. It’s something you hear all the time, but I’ve learned that it’s not just a joke. Sergio actually did it. He literally took a bullet for me, and that’s when I knew I had fallen in love with him. But you know, that wasn’t the first time. The first time I fell in love with him was when I was stuck in that tree. I didn’t know who he was, but I knew I’d never forget him. Little did I know, the boy who helped me was the same man who would later risk everything for me.”

I wiped my eyes and took a shaky breath. “And even though he wore a mask—literally and figuratively—I always gravitated toward him. I knew he was the one. He was the only one who would ever understand me, and he did. He always has.”

The words felt so small compared to the enormity of what I was trying to express. But I knew that no matter how much I tried to explain, it wouldn’t capture the depth of what I felt. Because what Sergio had given me was a love that didn’t need words. It was in every action, every sacrifice, and every smile.

“I’ve lied to you, too,” I continued, my voice quieter now. “I realized that no matter how much I tried to protect you or hide from you, you were always the one I was meant to be with. And I trust you now. I’ve always trusted you, even when I didn’t want to admit it.”

By the time I finished, we were both in tears. The crowd around us was silent, except for the soft sniffles coming from Dahlia and Alex.

All that mattered was that Sergio and I were here, finally free of the masks, the lies, and the distance.

The priest looked at us, his voice calm. “Mirella, Sergio, do you take each other to be your lawfully wedded husband and wife, to love and cherish, in good times and bad, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” we both said in perfect harmony.

The moment the words left my lips, I felt like the world shifted. There was no more doubt. No more fear. Just love.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the priest said with a smile, and the next words I heard were followed by a wave of joy that washed over me. “You may kiss the bride.”

Sergio leaned in with a smile, and his lips met mine, his hands resting on the small of my back, gently pulling me in. I drowned in his touch and the taste of him. He tasted like cherries. And in that kiss, everything we had been through—the pain, the struggle, the heartache—melted away. It was just us. Just love. We were finally free.

As we pulled away, I saw Sergio’s smile, and I couldn’t help but laugh through my tears. “We did it,” I whispered.

“We did,” he whispered back.

And from that moment on, I knew there was no going back. We had each other. We were home. And we were going to live happily ever after together as ONE.

THE END.