

# THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

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Ayla

When I wake up the next morning, I'm still feeling the warm glow from the night before. Losing my V-card was better than I expected. A lot better. I'm filled with a surprising amount of affection for the man who took it.

I turn over, looking for Alessio to cuddle him, but he's not in bed. Disappointed, I pick myself up, still naked, and throw on a big T-shirt. I leave the bedroom, wondering what we'll eat for breakfast.

Instead, he's already dressed.

"Do you want to order breakfast?" I ask. "Or we could check out the restaurant downstairs. I think I saw a blackberry French toast on the menu that looked amazing."

Alessio doesn't look at me. "Choose whatever you want. I have to go."

My face falls. "Go? We got married yesterday."

"And I have not one, but two criminal organizations to run."

"I thought marrying me was supposed to solve that problem."

"Marrying you makes the problem solvable. It doesn't solve it by itself."

"So stay and talk with me about it. Maybe I can help."

"Well, let's see. Every captain from the Razone family except Sal hates me, and probably wouldn't mind if I died. Meanwhile, the Gonzalez family literally just tried to kill me, and murdered my grandfather."

His tone is sharp, and it fills me with dismay. Last night, somehow, I actually felt some hope for us. Some warmth. Some connections.

Now, it feels like all of that has evaporated.

“Come on,” I say, stepping closer, “it’s the first day of our marriage. We can have breakfast together, at least.”

But emotionally, he recoils from that suggestion like I threatened him with a gun. I can see it written all over his face. “It’s the first day of our arranged marriage,” he corrects me, turning to the door.

I try to hold back the tears welling up in my eyes. “So that’s all this is? An arrangement? Nothing else?”

Alessio looks back only for a moment before he leaves. “Yes. It’s an arrangement. I don’t know why you thought it was anything more than that.”

He shuts the door, and I break down.

Alessio

Fuck! I clench my fist, almost wishing I was stupid enough to punch the wall. It would be satisfying, at least, but not worth the broken knuckles.

I hate how I just treated her. I watched the whole thing happen like a movie, an awful car crash I wanted desperately to stop.

But I couldn’t. I never can. Every time I start to get close to someone, it goes like this.

Maybe I’m just broken. Maybe the day I got pulled out of class and told on a crackly phone call in the principal’s office that both my parents had been murdered in a car bombing, something just broke inside me and I’ll never be able to fix it.

A part of me died that day. And that's why when Grandpa Nazio was killed, I couldn't die again. I've been through so much pain, there's no space left for it. Just anger and clarity of purpose.

I don't feel pain like that anymore. Not since I stopped letting people in. Now I have my armor up at all times, and it keeps me safe.

It also makes me do bullshit like what I just put Ayla through. Every. Fucking. Time. Which is exactly why I never wanted to get married.

Pulling out my cell phone, I call Dominguez, who is still guarding Anthony Gonzalez and his wife at their house. He picks up on the first ring. "Hey, man, congrats. Sorry I couldn't be at the wedding."

I ignore the marriage talk. "I'm coming to you. It's time for Anthony and me to have another chat."

When I pull up at the Gonzalez estate, however, I can tell immediately that something is wrong. The gate is open, and a line of black SUVs fills the driveway. One look tells me these vehicles aren't from the Razon family, or the Gonzalez family, either.

These are feds.

I swing a U-turn, going right back the way I came, and pull over on the side of the road. I stay there, watching the driveway from my rearview mirror. No commotion so far. What is going on?

After about 20 minutes, Dominguez calls me. "Shit, I'm assuming you saw? Sorry I couldn't call you earlier. Had my hands full."

"Yeah, it looked like it. FBI?"

"You guessed it. Lot of agents, too. It was a big ol' party."

"I assume from the fact that we're talking on the phone that you weren't arrested?"

“They were only there for Anthony . Had a warrant for his arrest and everything. They asked me about my pistol, but I’m a legal gun owner so they had to let me go. I’m leaving now.”

“Good. Meet me at Sal’s joint and we’ll talk.”

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Sal runs a strip club, which mostly serves as a money laundering operation. I don’t particularly like coming here, but it’s a convenient place to meet up in familiar territory. Sal is counting money in the back when I arrive.

“How’s it going, kid?” he asks, looking up. “Enjoy your wedding night?”

“Feds just hit Anthony Gonzalez,” I say, ignoring his question. “He’s in custody. We need to tighten things up.”

Dominguez bursts in, out of breath. “I just got here. You already explain to Sal?”

Sal nods. “I’ll tell my guys to run an even tighter ship than usual. Last thing we need is someone ending up in the can.”

I nod. “Good.”

“You know,” says Dominguez, “Now that I think about it, I’m not entirely sure this doesn’t help us. Getting loyalty from the Gonzalez captains should be a lot easier with the boss out of the way.”

I sigh. “I’m not even sure I have loyalty from the Razone captains. You saw them at my ceremony.”

“Oh, don’t worry about them,” Sal reassures me. “They can grumble, but they’re already coming around. Come on, this is a good thing. The Gonzalez boys will fall in line now that Anthony isn’t a factor.”

“Unless they think I’m the one who set him up,” I reply darkly. “They won’t support a rat.”

“That’s true,” Sal agrees. “But they’ve had quite the profitable operation under Anthony. Nobody really wants to rock the boat. Convince them you’re not a rat and that you’ll keep the cash flowing, and they’ll back you. Every one of ‘em.”

“You’re married to the daughter,” says Dominguez. “That’s going to count for a lot. Why don’t you meet with some of the captains. You know, show off your happy marriage, hit them with a little charm offensive.”

Fucking great.

Reluctantly, I nod. “You’re right. I’ll do that. Sal, who would you recommend I meet with first?”

“Giovanni Lombardo. He’s their highest earner. Nobody will dare go against you if you have his support.”

Dominguez snorts. “Gio the Butcher? Oh, have fun with that. Your wife is going to love him.”

### Alessio

Ayla and I have the honeymoon suite booked for the next couple of days. Closest thing we’ll get to a honeymoon, since I can’t exactly go on vacation right now with two Mafia families to get under control. I’m expecting Ayla to be upset at me when I come in through the door, but instead, she’s curled up on the couch, looking like a total snack in tight purple exercise shorts and a matching crop top. She looks up from her phone and greets me brightly.

“Hi, Alessio. How was your day?”

“Busy. Your father was arrested by the FBI.”

She raises her eyebrows, but overall seems a lot less impacted by this news than I had expected. “Yeah, they did that when I was nine. Had to let him go the next day. He’ll be out soon enough.”

“I don’t know about that. With RICO laws these days-” I break off as I notice that she’s distracted by something on her phone. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, just adding pictures to my dating profile.”

My eyebrows just about hit the ceiling. “Excuse me, adding what to yourwhat?”

“My dating profile,” she tells me sweetly. “I wanted to upload some of the bikini pictures from my trip to Europe.”

“I... bikini pictures?” I sputter.

“Yeah.” She holds up her phone. “This is me on the beach in Italy. I look cute, don’t I?”

I snatch the phone from her hand. It’s one of thosehere’s-my-assphotos where she’s looking over her shoulder with her back to the camera. Blood rushes to my cock as I see that her ass is covered only by the thin strap of a thong.

Fuck, she looks good.

“You’re going to delete these photos from the app right now,” I growl, handing the phone back to her, “and you’re not going to answer messages from anybody. In fact, you’re going to delete the app right now while I watch.”

Ayla shakes her head. “Sorry, too late. I already have a date planned for tomorrow, and another the next day.”

“Have you forgotten that you’re mywife?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten anything. This marriage is nothing more than an arrangement, as you made perfectly clear. That’s fine. We don’t have to have feelings for each other. I can get that from someone else.”

Possessive rage rips through me. “Are you trying to get these guys killed?”

“Nope. I might try to get them naked, though...”

I grab the phone back from her and fumble with the screen, trying to find her inbox in the app. “God dammit, how do I work this thing?”

“Bottom-right corner,” she offers helpfully. “There you go.”

“You are going to message both these guys and cancel your dates. Tell them you’re too busy getting your pussy filled by your husband.”

“Well, that would be awfully rude of me.” There’s a triumphant gleam in her eye now. I know I’m giving her the exact reaction she wanted, but I don’t care. The thought of somebody else having her makes me ready to fucking lose it.

“Let me make one thing clear,” I growl. “You go on dates with either of these men, it’ll be the last date they ever go on.”

“Okay, now you’re just being silly. I know you wouldn’t-”

“I would do anything to keep you as mine,” I tell her, my voice deadly serious. “I’d even wear a ghost mask to stop someone else from fucking you at a party.”

It takes a moment for my words to sink in. When they do, her jaw drops. “That was... Wait, no, but that doesn’t make sense. That wasn’t you. I saw his face.”

“Did you see it after he came back from the bathroom? Or when you were running from the police?”

Ayla’s eyes widen in shock. “Oh my god! You motherfucker! You took his mask? You... Where was he?”

I smirk. "Unconscious in the bathroom. Now delete your fucking dating profile like a good girl so I can pin you down and stretch your little pussy open the way you deserve."

She stares at me. "You're insane."

"Completely insane. Delete it. Now. Or you're going to get a spanking."

Her cheeks go bright red, and she doesn't meet my eyes. But to my satisfaction, she navigates immediately to her phone's settings and uninstalls the app. "There. Happy?"

"That's better," I rasp, my eyes exploring her body. "Come here, now. Off the couch."

She eyes me defiantly. "Why?"

A low growl rumbles in my throat and I pick her physically off the couch, ignoring her squeals. "So I can remind mywifewho fucking owns her."

She provides only token resistance, allowing me to pull her off the furniture and deposit her feet on the floor. "Yourarrangedwife."

I cut off any further words by pressing my lips roughly against hers. She stiffens for a second, then gives in to it, her soft body pressing against mine. My hands move almost magnetically to her ass, and I walk her backwards to the wall.

"I told you before," I growl, pinning her in place with my size, "when I was fucking your cunt with the vibrator in that hotel room. From now on, you belong to me. Nobody else will ever have you. There isnothingI will not do to enforce that."

Ayla lets out a growl of her own, grinding her crotch into my thigh. She writhes against me, half fighting, half getting herself off.

I can feel my cock stiffening. “You like being tamed, don’t you? You like the feeling of being overpowered, of playing the game and losing?”

She moans, a throaty sound, grinding herself against me. “Oh fuck, Alessio...”

I take a hold of her ponytail, pulling her head back. “Answer me, Ayla.”

She whimpers. “I... can’t. I’m embarrassed.”

“You don’t have to be,” I breathe. “Don’t ever be embarrassed for wanting what you want. Whatever dirty, embarrassing things you need from me, I’ve pictured myself doing something twice as filthy to you.”

Her eyes flash with interest. “What’s a filthy thing you’ve pictured yourself doing to me?”

“Putting you on your knees,” I growl, “and fucking your pretty little mouth the same way as your pussy.”

Ayla bites her lip. “So why don’t you?”

Fuckkkk. She’s exactly who I hoped she’d be. Keeping my grip on her ponytail, I push her down to the floor so she’s pinned between my hips and the wall. She looks up at me with big eyes, her mouth hanging open.

“You look so fucking perfect like that,” I groan, unbuckling my pants. “Such a good girl. Keep that mouth open for me.”

Ayla’s eyes follow my cock as I free it from my pants. My shaft is thick, veins snaking up its length, and right now, it’s throbbing.

“Take it in your mouth,” I rasp, my attention entirely fixed.

She obeys. I sigh with pleasure as her lips close around the head of my cock. “Fuck, Ayla, your little mouth feels so good.” My breathing gets hoarse as she takes me deeper, mouth enveloping more of my shaft. “Good girl. You can tap my leg if you’re going to gag.”

I'm in heaven as she starts to suck my cock, getting comfortable taking more of me. For someone who I can tell is inexperienced, she does a good job of keeping her teeth out of the equation. When I think I've gotten a feel for the limits of her gag reflex, I grip her hair, holding her head in place.

"I'm going to fuck your mouth now. Are you ready for that?"

She nods, not taking her lips off my cock. I groan, pushing myself deeper into her mouth. "God damn, baby girl, you're so good at that... Look how much of me you're taking. That's gotta be the first 6 inches. Think we can go for 7?"

Ayla nods again, her eyes starting to tear up.

"Such a good girl for me," I whisper, filling her throat with the rest of my shaft and holding it there. "Such a perfect little mouth for my cock. I'm going to keep fucking that mouth, okay, baby?"

I hold her head as I move my hips, thrusting into her throat. A tear trickled down her cheek and she moved her hand as if to tap my leg, but then held back.

"Okay?" I ask, stroking her cheek. She murmurs an affirmative, the sound muffled.

Groaning in satisfaction, I keep fucking her throat. "Wow, you really don't have much of a gag reflex. That feels so fucking good. Yessss..."

Pleasure floods through me as I come. A husky groan escapes with every breath, my cock pumping into her as she sucks me. I lean against the wall to stay upright, reeling. Ayla looks up at me, sucking the last drop out of the tip.

"Fuck," I breathe. "I can barely think. You want to swallow that for me, baby?"

My wife maintains eye contact as she swallows my cum. I groan, my cock still twitching.

Ayla

“Do you want to order dessert?” my husband asks, lying next to me in bed. We’ve been cuddling for the last hour and god, he smells so good.

I giggle. “I already ate.”

Alessio frowns. “You did? When did you-” He breaks off into chuckles, getting the joke. “I guess I did already feed you. Don’t say I never do anything for you.”

“Yeah, I’m stuffed. No, but seriously, we should get dessert.”

He flips through the menu, reading. “Let’s see... They’ve got cream puffs, eclairs, creme brulee... Boston cream pie... Bananas foster... Banana splits... Hmm... What else...”

“Are you trying to think of more dessert names with sexual double meanings?”

He puts his hand to his chest as though affronted. “Me? Iwould never.”

I snatch the menu out of his hand, giggling. “Okay, let’s see what they actually have... To be honest, I’ve always kind of wanted to try a Boston cream pie.”

“Are you saying you want me to give you a creampie?”

“Pretty sure you already gave me one last night.”

He leans forward, eyes narrowed in that satisfied-predator way. “Oh, you can alwayshave another.”

“Keep talking, I might have to take you up on that.”

It feels good to be vibing with Alessio like this. After all the bullshit conflict, this moment is nice. All he’s wearing is a white T-shirt and boxers now, and there’s something so cozy about it. For the first time, maybe, I actually feel like

one half of a married couple. Better than I might have expected for our first day, given how it started.

“You really followed me to that party? I... What did you do with Derek? ... Darren?” I laugh at the realization that I still don’t have a clue what his name was.

“I told you,” says Alessio, “I knocked him out and left him in the bathroom.”

“That’s... really fucked up.”

“Probably a good idea to stay off of dating apps, then.”

He raises his eyebrows. Jesus, he’s really not joking.

“So, they arrested my dad,” I say, changing topics. “You know what for?”

He makes a tight-lipped face. “Murder, apparently. They’re trying to connect him to some cold case from decades ago. No idea if it will stick.”

I fall silent, thinking. It’s painfully ironic that he gets arrested the day after I got married to escape his control. I could have just fucking waited. At the same time, there’s no saying how long before he’s out on the street again. In my experience, guys like him don’t do serious time.

Plus, I’m sure he still has plenty of influence, even behind bars.

“I’m surprised you heard about it from me,” says Alessio. “Didn’t your mom call you?”

I snort. “I blocked both my parents’ numbers before the wedding.”

“Geez, they must have really pissed you off.”

“Yeah, they did. I got accepted to BCU. I was going to live in the dorms, majoring in economics. My dad used his connections to cancel my acceptance.”

He shakes his head. “Jesus. Why did he do that?”

“To force me to marry you. And then the next day, he was trying to have you killed.”

“Damn. That one must have stung.”

It hits me in that moment that it’s only been two days since Alessio’s grandfather was murdered. “Oh my god, I just realized. Your grandfather. I’m so sorry. How are you doing?”

But when he looks at me, his eyes are cold. “I’m doing fine.” He gets up from the bed, taking away the warm cuddles. “I’m going to hit the hotel gym.”

“What? But what about dessert?”

He barely glances back at me as he throws on a pair of shorts and leaves the room. “Get whatever you want.”

What I wanted was to share it with him. But whatever closeness we just built seems to be gone. I lie back in bed, dejected.

Then I ordered the cream pie.

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Ayla

The next morning, Alessio wakes up before me and I hear him taking a phone call in the other room. His trip to the “gym” last night lasted nearly 3 hours. Long enough that when he got back, I was already in bed. I still don’t exactly know what I did wrong, but I won’t be asking about his grandfather’s death again, that’s for sure.

The phone call sounds serious. I get up and hop in the shower, and when I get out, I see that he’s ordered crepes for breakfast.

“Strawberry-Nutella or banana-brown sugar?” he asks, holding out two plates.

I take one of them. “Strawberry-Nutella, obviously. Why did you even get the other one?”

He shrugs. “I like banana. Ever had bananas foster? Pretty amazing.”

“You and your penis-themed desserts. I’ll eat my strawberry crepe like the innocent girl I am.”

Alessio hits me with the bedroom eyes. “My dear, you and I both know that you’re far from innocent. I’ve made sure of that.”

I dig into my breakfast, and it’s just as good as it sounds. “Mmm. So is this your way of apologizing for last night?”

An emotion I can’t read flashes across his face, and he ignores my question. “There’s something we need to do today.”

I blink. “We?”

“Yes, ‘we’. You’re not just a trophy wife, remember? I married you so I could take over the Gonzalez family.”

“Well, aren’t you romantic.”

“I never claimed to be. This is business, unfortunately.”

Okay. Business it is. I straighten up, putting my plate down on the coffee table. “All right. What are we doing?”

Alessio takes a deep breath. “I need to convince your father’s capos that I didn’t rat him out to the FBI.”

“And what does that entail?”

“My Uncle Sal arranged a meeting between me and the top Gonzalez captain. Are you familiar with Giovanni Lombardo?”

I wince. “Gio the Butcher? Yeah, I know him. Unfortunately.”

My husband chuckles. “Dominguez told me you’d have that reaction. I don’t think I’ve met him. What’s he like?”

“Well, you have to know his reputation.”

“I mean, I assume you don’t get called ‘the Butcher’ for nothing.”

That makes me snort. “I think even the other captains are afraid of him. My dad hates his guts. Only tolerates him because his crew brings in so much money.”

Alessio scratches the stubble on his jawline. “That makes sense. And it’s probably good for us. Sounds like he had more of a working relationship with your dad than any actual loyalty. Shouldn’t be too hard to win him over.”

“I hope you’re right. My dad never wanted me to hear him talking about the business, but I know he bent over backwards to keep that relationship friendly. I’m pretty sure Gio was the only man who ever really scared him.”

Maybe other than your grandfather, I think, not finishing the thought.

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I’ve met Giovanni “the Butcher” Lombardo several times at weddings and the like, but I’ve never been to his home. I feel uneasy as Alessio’s henchman Dominguez drives us out to his estate in Beauford Hills, one of Bover City’s suburbs.

“This neighborhood is swanky,” Dominguez remarks, looking out the window at the impressive houses. “Guy almost lives like a boss. His is this one on the left.”

“What did my grandfather think of Gio Lombardo?” Alessio asks Dominguez as we pull up to the gate.

“Thought he was a mean bastard, from what I could tell. I remember him saying Anthony Gonzalez would find a way to keep him in check if he had any sense. Gio’s crew being so profitable and all.”

A big man in a designer tracksuit comes out and glances into the car, then waves us through the gate.

“Okay,” says Dominguez as we drive up to the house. “I’ll put ‘spending the night in Gio the Butcher’s mansion’ on the list of things I could have happily gone my whole life without doing.”

Same.

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Giovanni Lombardo is attractive in that sleazy, rattish kind of way, with dark hair and absolutely dead eyes. He has two painful-looking scars on his left cheek that legend has it come from knife fighting in his youth, and his 40-something years haven’t done anything to soften the wiry strength of his frame.

He greets us at the door, looking me up and down in a fashion that isn’t quite subtle enough. “Alessio Razone,” he says, shaking my husband’s hand. “Your grandfather was a titan. I was deeply sorry to hear about his passing.”

“I appreciate that,” Alessio replies stoically.

“But even from tragic loss, good things can come. I see you have brought your lovely new wife to my home. Congratulations on your marriage.” He kisses my hand. “And your associate is?”

Dominguez holds out his hand. “Dominguez Gary.”

They shake, and Gio leads us to the living room. Another man is sitting on the one of the couches, wearing a jacket that clashes horribly with his patterned shirt. “This is Robert Costa, my second-in-command.”

Just as Gio did, Robert looks me up and down before shaking hands with Alessio and Dominguez.

Yuck.

We sit down. The room around us is lavish, the star feature being an enormous fish tank in the center containing what seem to be...

“Are those piranhas?” Dominguez asks, pointing.

Gio’s face lights up. “They are indeed! Red-bellied piranhas, specifically. Lovely little creatures.”

Alessio nods his head appreciatively. “Is keeping them dangerous?”

Our host leans forward. “Not at all! They actually don’t deserve their reputation. Would you believe all the stuff you’ve heard about them came from Teddy Roosevelt? He went to the Amazon, see, and the natives wanted to give him a show. So they starved a school of piranhas and fed them a cow, and sure enough, those piranhas stripped the flesh from the bone. But in nature, they would never go after something that big unless it was already dead. Here, allow me to demonstrate.”

Gio stands up and walks over to the tank, which is about the size of a hot tub and as tall as his shoulders. Rolling up his sleeve, he reaches in through a window at the top and sticks his entire hand into the tank. The sharp-toothed fish swim around him, investigating, but not biting.

“I think the moral of the story,” says Gio, shaking the water off his hand and coming back to us, “is that dangerous things don’t need to be our enemies. We can live with them, if each party understands and respects the other. Wouldn’t you agree?”

"I was just as broken up as I'm sure you were to hear about Anthony 's arrest," says Alessio. "My own father-in-law and all. It's been quite the shock. To both of us."

My husband puts his hand over mine. I nod solemnly, playing the part.

Robert snorts. "And right after you came in line to take over the family, too. That's mighty convenient. Nazio makes you his successor, he croaks it. Then you marry Gonzalez's daughter, and old Anthony gets pinched by the feds. I'm not saying anything, obviously. Just, you gotta see how it looks. People are gonna have their concerns."

"Hey," Dominguez retorts sharply, "you better not be implying what I think you are."

"Robert has the knack for saying things that are impolite," chuckles Gio the Butcher, "but that everyone is thinking. Please do not hold it against him. As we all know, appearances matter."

"People will have their opinions," Alessio says evenly, "but I'm not worried about people. A smooth transfer of power means the cash keeps flowing. For everybody. If you back me publicly, the other Gonzalez captains will fall in line."

Gio nods thoughtfully. "You're right about that. I'm open to it. If the terms are right."

"Okay, let's talk numbers. I'm willing to match the arrangement you had with Gonzalez."

My attention wanders. There's something creepy about this living room that I can't quite place. My eyes explore the ornaments on the coffee table, trying to figure out what exactly is encased in that clear block of resin...

I can't help but recoil as I realize that embalmed in the transparent cube is a human jawbone, complete with teeth. Robert makes eye contact with me, noticing my reaction, and a cruel smile appears on his face. I avoid his gaze, my heart suddenly hammering.

"Perhaps we should continue this conversation after dinner?" our host suggests. "We have all night to talk business. Let's enjoy some good food."

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It is good food. We sit outside on the patio, feasting on pesto pasta with fresh tomatoes along with lemon-herb chicken and roasted asparagus. After the catering staff clear our plates, we stay at the table drinking limoncello, taking in the night air.

It seems like the negotiation is going well. "I can see why your grandfather picked you," says Gio. "You've got stones."

Alessio's face twitches, but he accepts the compliment. "And I can see why he respected the way you do business. What if we keep the same arrangement you had with Gonzalez, but we shave two points off. Hell, call it two and a half. That way for you, nothing changes. You just get to keep more money."

The other man frowns, mulling it over. "Three and a half."

Alessio pauses and makes brief eye contact with Dominguez. Then he holds out his hand. "Done."

Gio's scarred face breaks into a smile. "Then we should have champagne."

"Lucky bastard, aren't you?" says Robert. "The old man kicks the bucket just in time, and then you get to marry this piece of ass." He leers at me. "What say you throw her my way for the night? I'd be happy to break her in for you."

Alessio's eyes flash, but he remains calm. Gio watches his reaction, and I swear there's something smug in his eyes. Like he knows the deal they just made is too good for Alessio to make an issue of the disrespect.

"He's going to keep pushing boundaries," warns Dominguez, meeting with us in our guest bedroom when we retire after dinner. "The deal you made was smart, but he thinks he's going to be able to walk all over you."

I'm uneasy as I go to bed. Growing up as the daughter of Anthony Gonzalez, nobody ever spoke to me like that. It would have been a death sentence. But Alessio just let it happen. All to secure his position within the family.

It's an arrangement. Stop expecting him to care about you.

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Robert doesn't join us for breakfast. We eat on the patio again, this time a very American meal of eggs, bacon, and hash browns.

"I'm sure it's just his stomach," says our host, walking us back into the house. "It bothers him sometimes." We're on our way out now. The deal is done.

Gio, Dominguez, Alessio, and I pass through the living room, the first time we've entered it today. When my eyes land on the fish tank, I scream.

Floating in the piranha tank is a bloated corpse with half its skeleton picked clean. The water is red and cloudy as the fish swarm, devouring pieces of the flesh. Not much is left of the face, but what does remain makes its identity clear:

It's Robert.

Gio the Butcher stares at it, seething. His face is pale, but I can see the calculations quickly being made behind his dead eyes.

"I agree with what you said yesterday," says Alessio, taking my hand. "We can get along with dangerous creatures. If we show them the proper respect."

Ayla

“Did you see his face?” grins Dominguez, punching the seat next to him. “Fuck yeah! Old Butcher looked like he saw a ghost. I’d say he got our message, all right.”

Next to me, driving, Alessio is more grimly satisfied than jubilantly triumphant. But he allows himself to smile, more real than any expression he showed meeting with Gio the Butcher. “Yeah, that went well. Jesus, though, I see why that guy bothers people. What a creep.”

“What, you didn’t like him?”

“He’s not invited to Christmas dinner, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Dominguez chuckles in the backseat. “He’s nicer than that Irish fucker who keeps muscling in on the South Side. I think we might be looking at a problem with him soon. I wonder if he has any weird pets we could feed him to.”

I stare out the window, disturbed that I’m not more disturbed by all of this. I just saw firsthand what the man I’m married to is capable of. But instead of terrified, it makes me feel... protected?

“You okay, babe?” my husband asks, putting his hand on my thigh.

Babe?

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I reply, and I think I actually mean it.

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When we get back to Bover City, we drop Dominguez off at his apartment. And that’s when I realize I don’t really know where I live anymore.

“Where are we going?” I ask Alessio, suddenly shy.

“To my penthouse. I’ve had your things from your parents’ house moved in.”

“Already? That was fast.”

He shrugs. “You’re my wife. Would you rather live with your mom?”

I shake my head vigorously. “Hell no.”

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Alessio’s place is legitimately gorgeous. There’s a big gas fireplace in the living room that I’ll bet is amazingly cozy in the winter, and through sliding glass doors I can see a balcony with a view of the city skyline and an attached infinity pool. Clearly, this man did okay for himself before he started working with his grandfather.

“What did you do before joining the life?” I ask as he gives me the tour.

“Killed people,” he grunts. Figures, I suppose.

“And why did you decide to get made after being independent for so long?”

His face is blank. “Next question.”

Okay, then. As we exit the living room, I notice a target set up with a knife stuck into it. Next to it is a hole in the wall, clearly from a miss.

“Working on your aim?” I joke.

He cracks a smile. “No, I was trying to hit the wall.”

“So just for my own understanding. When you got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, was you and Dominguez killing Robert and stuffing him into the piranha tank?”

Alessio stops. “Does that upset you?”

“No. If this is an arrangement, that’s you holding up your end.”

His face twitches. Have my words offended him? Then he steps forward. “You’re my wife now. No one will ever disrespect you in front of me again without waking up dead the next morning.”

“Yeah, you really brought a new meaning to sleep with the fishes.”

“That was a nice touch, wasn’t it? The piranha tank.”

“Am I sick in the head if I say yes?”

“Not nearly as sick as I am.”

I chuckle. “I won’t argue that, considering you stalked me to a college party and choked a dude out so you could take his costume and be with me instead. He’s okay, right?”

“Hit him with a syringe, actually. Very low probability it killed him.”

“Jesus. That was before we were married, too.”

“You were already mine.”

I look up at him. God, he’s handsome. Something about the way his slightly messy dark hair frames his face. “That was really true in your mind, wasn’t it?”

He takes another step forward, right into my space. “It was true. Period.”

I gulp. “And what made it true?”

“I made it true. I make my own reality. I fucking wanted you and now you’re mine.”

“And what reality are you trying to make now?”

His eyes drill into me. “You. Naked.”

I blink. “What?”

“If I have to say it again, I’ll take your clothes off for you.”

Shit. He's not joking. My cheeks starting to flush, I move to obey him, pulling my shirt over my head as he leans against the door frame, watching.

"Everything, Ayla."

It turns me on so much when he gets authoritative like this. I strip off my pants, and then my bra, and finally, the panties.

"Jesus," Alessio groans, drinking me in with his eyes. "You are so fucking perfect." Then he shakes his head, as though snapping himself out of a trance. "Let's go swimming. I got the pool heating up on our way over here."

I laugh at the sudden change in tone. "Swimming? I have no idea where any of my swimsuits are. I don't even know where your guys put my shit."

He grins. "Your things are in the bedroom. But you won't be needing a swimsuit."

"I-what?"

I watch in shock as he pulls off his own shirt, and then the rest of his clothes, too. As though magnetically attracted, my eyes snap to the sharp V-lines at his waist. They extend all the way down to his crotch like they're carved into a statue. It's satisfying to realize that he's my husband, and I'm allowed to check him out. I guess three hours in the gym could make sense with a body like that.

Also, he looks about halfway hard. Hello.

"Let's go," he says, taking my hand.

"Are you sure it's-"

"I'm sure." Alessio leads me out to the balcony, buck naked, and I can barely bring myself to step over the threshold. I feel ridiculously exposed with the entire city stretching before me. It's broad daylight. The middle of the afternoon.

“Like this,” says my husband, stepping confidently outside.

I take a deep breath, and then I just go for it. And you know what? It’s tremendously freeing.

“You see this city?” he asks, pointing out to the skyline. Buildings stretch ahead of us. Below, a sea of cars.

“Yeah. I grew up here.”

“This is yours now. Ours. And we’ll pass it down to our children.”

I shiver, still not used to being naked outside like this. I know nobody can see us, but it feels so close to being in public.

“You like knowing that this embarrasses me, don’t you? Being naked outside?”

“You don’t look embarrassed. You look excited. That’s what I like.”

“Damn. You’re not wrong.”

“I think what embarrasses you is the fact that you are excited.”

I laugh. “That’s the truest thing I’ve ever heard. I guess I just feel like I’m always walking a tightrope. Everybody loves a sexual woman until suddenly, she’s a slut.”

He looks at me very seriously. “I meant what I said before. You don’t ever have to be embarrassed or hide those parts of yourself around me. I want to explore all of those deep, dark places inside of you.”

I look up at him, biting my lip. “Oh yeah?”

His lips flare. “Yes. Sit on the edge of the pool. Now.”

I can feel my body responding to the command in his voice. “Is that an order?”

“Yes. You may own this city, but I own you.”

Yes, sir. I walk over to the edge of the pool and sit down, dipping my feet into the warm water. Alessio wades into the pool, muscles rippling in the sun, and positions himself in front of me.

“Open those legs for me, baby,” he whispers, making eye contact.

Blushing brilliantly, I comply. His gaze travels lower, burning approval in his eyes.

“Scoot closer for me, now.”

My breath catching, I do as he commands. I’ve never had anyone eat me out before. Is that what he wants to...

It is. I gasp as his tongue slides through my folds, its warmth tickling in the most incredible way.

“Oh my...” My voice trails off into heavy breathing. Fuck, that feels good. So good I could almost forget where I am.

A car horn sounds below, breaking me out of my bliss.

“Don’t worry about them,” Alessio breathes from between my legs. “Nothing else matters. Nothing on the outside matters. Just me and you, and what I’m doing with my tongue.”

I lean back, starting to moan. He keeps sliding his tongue over my clit, then stopping. Over my clit, then stopping. Each time he does it, it feels better, until my hips start to tremble.

My husband wraps his hands around my thighs, not allowing me to get away from him as it becomes harder and harder not to squirm. I know I’m being loud now, but it doesn’t matter anymore. I think I might actually come from this.

“Oh fuck,” I gasp, sliding closer and closer to the edge. “Oh fuck, oh fuck...”

Alessio keeps holding my pussy in place as he licks me into one of the most earth-shattering orgasms I've ever had. I fall back on the pool deck, exhausted, flooded with fuzzy hormones. When I'm done, he climbs up next to me and I put my head on his chest.

"That's my fucking girl," he whispers.