

THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

Ayla

My pussy twitches, aching for Alessio's touch. The fact that I can't see him, can't hear him, can't even move, is driving me crazy. I want so badly to rub my clit, to give it the much-needed release of an orgasm. But I can't. All I can do is stay in place, waiting for him to return.

I don't even know if he's in the room. He could be downstairs, he could be outside for all I know. I wiggle my fingers, which is about all the movement I can muster, but there's no response.

I've never experienced sensory deprivation like this before. I've heard about those tanks where you float on your back in saltwater, and I imagine they must be something like this. Well, except for the part where I'm strapped to a bed with my legs spread open. I can feel some combination of my own wetness and Alessio's cum leaking out of me, reminding me of the sheer animal urges that have been expressed today.

I got what I wanted, all right. I am definitely at his mercy. And I really like it.

I can really only guess how long I've been lying here. 20 minutes? An hour? Occasionally, I feel something, a breath, a movement of air, and I wonder if Alessio is watching me.

There's no way to tell.

After some indeterminate amount of time, I feel his hand on my thigh. The fingers stroke up my body slowly, over my hip and to my chest, and my

breathing gets faster. He's teasing me, but I'll take it. At least he's paying attention to me again.

His fingers brush my pussy. It's not much, but I'm so sensitive right now, so attuned to any stimulation. It makes me moan.

I whimper as the fingers go away. God, I want it so badly. My whole body is on fire.

And then, to my surprise, I feel him taking the earmuffs off and pulling the earplugs out of my ears. I gasp at the sudden change in my reality. I can hear! Waves are sloshing in the background. Birds are chirping.

My husband growls.

"I'd ask if you're ready to be a good girl for me now, but it doesn't matter. Today, I'm only loosening your restraints enough to fuck you."

I try to keep my breathing steady as he unties my legs from the bed.

"When I release your ankle, you keep it where it is. You stay completely still. Do you understand me?"

I say nothing, and his hand goes to my throat.

"Do you understand me?"

I nod, unable to speak through the gag.

"Good."

I keep my legs in place as he unties them, then he moves around to do my hands. When all my limbs are free, he helps me to stand up, holding my waist tightly. I put my weight on shaky legs, still blind.

"That's right, bend over for me," says my husband, pushing me forward and slapping my ass. I lean over the bed, my elbows supporting my weight.

My whole body tingles with excitement as Alessio wiggles the plug, then starts to pump it inside me. He pulls it out slightly so my ass strains around it.

“Good girl,” he says, teasing me with the biggest part of the plug. “I can see that your ass is ready for me.”

I just moan, in a very submissive headspace now. He can do what he wants.

Alessio gets on the bed in front of me. His cock strokes through the folds of my pussy, and my moan gets louder as he pushes the tip inside.

“Fuck, Ayla, you’re so wet for me. There’s so much here that I won’t even need lube when I fuck your ass.”

Then he removes the plug entirely, and I feel the head of his cock leave my pussy and press against my other hole.

“You were very cute running away from me today,” he growls, slowly pushing his cock into my ass. I grasp the bedsheets, screaming silently into the gag.

“But now you’re right back where you belong. Now you get a reminder of who you belong to, and just how deeply I own you.”

His fingers dig into my hips as he starts to thrust. It’s intense, so intense I can barely process the sensation. It’s crazy how deep he feels inside me, like he’s fucking my soul.

“You are my property,” Alessio rasps. “My fucking property. Your nipples and your clit are toys for me to play with, and your holes are for taking my cock.”

He pinches one of my nipples, as though to underline his point, then reaches around and gives my clit a little slap. My pussy clenches, feeling empty.

“Oh, would you like me to fill your other hole, too? I can do that. I can fucking do that.”

I hear him pick an object up from the bedside table, and then I gasp as something new parts my pussy lips.

“Yes, I brought your rabbit vibrator,” he purrs, stroking my cheek. “You’re going to take that in your pussy while I fuck your ass.”

I let go, releasing throaty moans into the gag as Alessio penetrates me with the vibrator. I’ve never felt this full before. I can’t believe he’s filling my pussy and my ass at the same time. The intensity is almost too much to process after being deprived of my senses.

Then he flicks on the vibration.

My back arches, eyes rolling into my head as the rabbit ears buzz directly on my clit. All the sensations blend together, a screaming explosion of pleasure overwhelming my lower body. He keeps fucking my ass, pumping the vibrator inside me, the rabbit ears dragging over my clit. It’s so much that I can’t hold it for much longer...

My hips quiver uncontrollably as my orgasm gets closer. I know I’m supposed to ask, but I can’t with the gag in my mouth. And frankly, I wouldn’t, even if I could. I can’t risk him taking it away. I need this climax like I need air.

Somehow, Alessio is just as attuned to my body as I am. “I can see you need to come,” he groans, voice strained. “And I’m going to let you. When I count all the way down. Five... Four... Three...”

I do my best to hold it, wanting to obey him. I squeeze my muscles like I’m doing a Kegel, trying to hold it back, but it just makes his cock feel so much bigger inside me, my pussy so much tighter around the vibrator...

“Two... One... There you go, baby. You can let it out for me now.”

Every muscle in my body squeezes at the incredible, earthshaking release. I feel my pussy and my ass clenching, his firm hands holding my hips in place, and his thrusting only gets faster. He’s fucking me with everything he has.

“Oh my fucking god...” Alessio’s cock starts to twitch inside my ass. His body crashes down onto mine, warm skin pressing against me, releasing pump after pump of his warm seed inside me. The vibrator buzzes between us, still on my clit, and my hips jerk as I continue to climax.

My husband breathes, staying on top of me, hands pinning my wrists to the bed. I can hear his shaky, ragged breath in my ear, feel his heart pounding.

“I’m never letting you go,” he whispers hoarsely. “Play your little games if you want, but I’ll always find you, and I’ll always bring you back where you belong.” He kisses my cheek. “Always.”

Ayla

I spend the next 24 hours constantly in some combination of naked, bound, gagged, and taking dick. Alessio unties me only as much as is necessary for me to eat and fulfill bodily functions, and other than that, I’m either getting fucked or tied up like a piece of furniture, completely immobile while he goes about his day.

That evening, he packs up his suitcase while I’m tied to the bed in the same bent-over position I’ve been holding for the last hour. I’m naked and gagged, and also wearing the plug. Every time he passes by, he takes a moment to feel me up, usually finishing with a spank. I’m used to it by this point, but it still doesn’t make me feel any less dominated as he comes up behind me, slides a finger through my pussy lips to check my wetness, then presses on the plug until I whimper.

“It’s so cute the way your butt wiggles when I play with the plug,” says Alessio. He gives my ass a little slap. “You’re giving me such a pretty view, bent over like that.”

I grunt in frustration, the words muffled.

Another light spank, this time on the other cheek. “I love the way it ripples.” He brushes my clit, causing my whole body to shake. “But the really fun part is, there’s something I know about this situation that you don’t.”

I turn over my shoulder to look at him, confused. I really don’t know what he’s talking about.

He just grins, putting a hand in his pocket.

And then my entire reality explodes.

I cry out, back arching, fingers gripping the sheets with what little slack my restraints allow me. Incredible, shocking pleasure emanates from my lower parts, accompanied by a familiar buzzing sound...

“Yeah,” he says smugly, “the plug you’re wearing is a different one from before. And this one vibrates. And comes with a remote control.”

Motherfucker.

I can barely process what’s happening. The vibration of the plug is shattering, and my body is so sensitive from being held here, turned on but denied.

The vibration stops. Alessio pulls a little white plastic remote out of his pocket, showing it to me. “You see this button? It turns the vibrations on and off.”

He clicks it twice, demonstrating. I gasp at the sudden jolt. He watches me, clearly enjoying himself.

“Do you want to know what this other button does?”

“Unnhh?” I reply through my ball gag.

His eyelids lower. "It changes the intensity."

A couple more clicks on the remote have me writhing in place as he ups the strength of the vibration. He reaches behind my head, and I feel him unbuckling the gag.

"Oh my god... I can't... it's so intense..."

Grinning, Alessio presses the button again, and the plug starts vibrating even more ferociously. My breathing gets faster, and I can barely string words together even though my mouth is finally free.

"Well," he says calmly as I squirm and moan, "I was going to finish packing up the suitcase. But I think I'm actually going to take a break. Because I can't resist fucking your pussy right now." He walks behind me and grabs my hips, pulling them into place at the edge of the bed. "Stay like this. Don't lose the position."

A deep, wailing moan comes out of my lips as my husband unbuckles his pants and slides himself inside me. Fuck, I'm so full. I scoot forward instinctively, but he wrenches me back into place, spanking my ass.

"Stay, Ayla."

"I'm trying," I whimper, the sensation overwhelming as his thick cock bottoms out. "Alessio, oh my fucking..."

"That's right," he growls, pressing my face into the bed. "Take this fucking cock. Just like that. Just like fucking that. Oh fuck, that's a good girl. Yeah, squeeze my cock with your pussy just like that..."

His words devolve into animal growls and his fingers dig deeper into my soft flesh. Soon, the thrusting becomes so powerful that my whole body is moving on the bed, pulling at the restraints. He keeps fucking me until his growls get throaty and his cock twitches inside me, filling me with his sticky warmth.

“That was so fucking good,” he grunts, slapping my ass as he pulls out. “I just...fuck.”

I whimper, trying to grind my clit on the edge of the bed. The plug in my ass is still buzzing, and I’m desperate for a release.

Alessio spreads my pussy with his fingers, making me moan. “I love leaving my cum inside you. Feels like marking my fucking territory.”

I sigh as I feel another vibrator press against my clit.

“Are you ready to come for me now, Ayla?”

I nod eagerly.

“Words.”

“Yes,” I tell him, blushing.

“Yes, what?”

It takes everything I have to control my glare. “Yes, I’m ready to come for you.”

He smiles. “Good girl. But you know I’m going to make you beg for it.”

A defiant growl rumbles in my throat, earning me a spank.

“You know you’re just making it sweeter for me when you finally give in.”

Another growl, another spank. He keeps working the vibrator on my clit, and I can’t help but grind myself against it. Before long, my breathing is heavy and I’m feeling the tingles of a coming climax.

“Please,” I whisper, “can I come?”

His response is a chuckle. “That didn’t sound very much like begging to me.”

I keep grinding myself on the vibrator, but he pulls it back slightly, not allowing me to get the full stimulation.

“Please, I want to come!”

“Better. Keep begging.”

Oh, fuck, I can’t take this anymore.”Please!”I beg, desperately chasing the vibrator with my clit. “Please, sir, can I come?”

There’s a deep satisfaction in Alessio’s voice now. He presses the vibrator against me, using the perfect amount of pressure. “Nowthatsounded like begging. Good girl, Ayla. You can come for me now.”

“Thank you...oh my god, yes...”

My toes start to curl as my eyes roll back.

Alessio

I give Ayla zero chance to escape, all the way up until the point that our bags are packed and it’s time to get picked up by boat. To her consternation, I walk her out to the dock still wearing the collar and the leash.

“You know, this is the first time I’ve worn clothes in days,” she comments, looking down at her crop top and shorts. “Almost feels weird.”

“That’s what the leash is for,” I tell her, grinning. “To maintain some consistency.”

She blushes. “And the plug?”

I wink, noticing the boat getting bigger in the distance. “That’s for me to have fun. I suppose I should take the collar off now.”

Ayla glances at the boat, and then back at me. “Yeah, I suppose you should.”

I unbuckle it, gently kissing her neck where the leather once sat. She sighs softly.

“You’re still mine,” I whisper, clicking the remote in my pocket. My wife gasps, her whole body stiffening as the vibrator comes to life.

I keep teasing her on the plane ride back, turning the vibration on whenever I feel like it. Eventually, I just leave it on the highest setting, watching with pleasure as Ayla squirms in her seat, moaning. Soon she starts to touch herself, and it makes me so incredibly satisfied when she looks up at me as her climax gets nearer.

“Can I come, please?”

I smile. “Such a good girl. Yeah, come for me, Ave.”

I start to rub my cock through my pants as I watch her bring herself to orgasm, her hips jerking. I love that she’s asking permission now without being prompted, and that she’s so comfortable touching herself in front of me. She really is my fucking pet.

Growling, I unzip and my cock comes out. A moment later, I’m dragging her over to the window and yanking down her shorts, pressing her face against the clear plastic as I fuck her and spank her ass.

“Still fucking mine,” I rasp, holding her neck as I near my climax. “Always fucking mine, collar or not.”

My orgasm explodes through me and I clutch her, groaning in her ear.

Ayla

With about an hour to go before we land at the Bover City airport, Alessio finally removes the plug. Other than the cum slowly leaking into my underwear, that's the last physical reminder of his dominance over me. His ownership.

My head is still reeling from the last couple of days. I can barely process how exhilarating that entire experience was, how freeing it was to completely let go like that. When Alessio caught me the second time, that was true surrender.

And I loved it.

It's hard to describe. But somehow, in being restrained by him, I felt safe. Cared for. Important. Maybe it's the sheer amount of attention he showed, the effort he put into finding me, catching me, using me once I was caught. But right now, I don't feel like a pawn in the chess game of Mafia politics.

I feel like his wife.

I feel like someone Alessio dotes on, and creates special experiences for her birthday. How much did renting that island cost, much less on short notice? The food stations? The private jet? Not just the expense, but the effort. He set all of this up, did all that thinking, all that planning, and for what?

To make me happy.

And it did.

So why do I feel like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop?

Ayla

Three days later

Being back in Bover City is a harsh return to reality. On that island, everything melted away. But now that I'm back in the real world, I have no choice but to take an honest look at my circumstances.

I'm barreling headfirst into this thing, even though I know I shouldn't.

I wasn't supposed to have feelings for my husband.

He doesn't have them for me. I might want to tell myself that, but I know it would be a lie. He likes fucking me. He likes me submitting to him. He likes that our marriage has allowed him to take over my father's crime family.

But I'd be kidding myself if I thought it was more than that. Wouldn't I? He's said as much himself. And now I've got all the memories of this amazing birthday trip, and all the emotions within that, and they're fucking with me. I have to keep reminding myself that it isn't real.

I grew up with Mafia men. I know how they think and how they operate. And because of that, I know exactly what their wives are to them:

Babymakers. Vehicles to secure their legacy. A means to an end.

Not lovers. Not partners.

That amazing trip to Mexico my dad took us on when I was 12, the one I still think about? That was my mom's consolation prize after she caught him renting a hotel room with a cocktail waitress from his nightclub. She let it slip a few years later, after her seventh glass of wine. It was one of the few unguarded moments where she allowed me to see her as something other than the devoted mob wife, and that peak behind the mask has stayed with me ever since.

Could my situation really be different?

I sit in my car in Alessio's driveway, staring at my reflection in the rearview mirror. I've spent my whole life not wanting to become my mother. Not wanting a life like hers, not wanting a marriage like hers. And yet with every choice I make, the worry grows that I'm on a path that leads to the exact same place.

It's driving me crazy.

Am I ignoring all the obvious signs? Am I a fool because I'm falling for him? Or am I just worrying myself out of happiness because my own personal baggage won't let me feel safe?

I brush the hair out of my face and put my car in reverse.

It's with some trepidation that I knock on the door of the house I grew up in. I don't fully know what I'm expecting. But ever since Alessio and I got back from the island, a part of me has felt lost.

"Ayla," says my mother, her eyes widening as she opens the door. "Come here."

She pulls me into a deep hug.

"Hey, mom."

She breaks the embrace. "Well, well, come on in. I'll make tea."

I follow her, a wave of nostalgia hitting me as I walk through the house. It looks just like it did before.

It still feels like home.

"You never responded to my text messages," she chides me, putting the kettle on.

Yup. Just like before.

"I had you and dad blocked," I admit.

"Oh." My mom looks hurt as she fiddles with the kettle, not looking at me. "I guess I can understand. With everything that happened."

We're silent as the water boils. Finally, she pours two mugs and we move to the dining room table.

"You know that your father is in jail?"

"Yeah. I know."

"Have you been to visit him?"

I shake my head.

"You should, you know."

"You even think he would want to see me?"

She shrugs, a hint of annoyance in her expression. "Probably not, after the way you treated him."

"So why did you just tell me to visit?"

"It's what a good daughter would do."

I put my mug down a little too hard. "Well, sorry. I'm done being the good daughter."

"Yes, I think that's very clear."

Anger spills out of me. Does she always have to have this smug, perfect answer for everything? "Mom, what the hell was I supposed to do? First you forced me to marry this guy I didn't want to be with, then you canceled my college education and ruined my life plans, and then you told me that actually, psych! Now I'm not marrying him! Did you ever consider that maybe, just maybe, I wanted to make some decisions about my own future, rather than riding this fucking bullshit rollercoaster of Mafia politics?"

My mother looks slightly cowed, and she doesn't make eye contact. "I am sorry about the whiplash. Things got... sticky at the end."

My jaw drops. “Things got sticky? You made a stupid decision to have me marry him, and then you made a stupid decision to kill him instead. That’s not sticky, that’s psychopathic. You’re supposed to protect your family, not use them as pawns!”

Instantly, her expression changes back to anger. “Don’t you dare talk about things you don’t understand. You have no idea how hard I’ve worked to protect our family. And we always planned for you to marry Alessio.”

“Well, you got what you wanted,” I tell her bitterly. “I’m married to him. Only he’s the boss of the family now, not dad. Which means you don’t get a say in my future anymore.”

“Then congratulations,” she snaps. “You got what you wanted, too.”

“This isn’t what I fucking wanted!” I yell, almost knocking over my tea. “I wanted to go to college. To be normal, not married to a fucking gangster at 20 years old!”

The slightest hint of guilt flashes across my mother’s face, but she chooses defensiveness. “I never even saw why you wanted to go to college. It’s not like you’ll ever have to work.”

“I don’t care if you understand it! It was what I wanted for my life, and you took it away from me. I can’t believe you would do that to your daughter.”

“So go get it back,” says my mom, shrugging. “If your new husband is so powerful. Like you said, your father and I don’t get a say.”

When Alessio gets home that evening, the first thing I notice are the bruises on his knuckles.

“What happened?” I ask, wincing. I remember my father coming home like that. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he grunts. “Stopped at a boxing gym today, hit the heavy bag for a while.”

I raise my eyebrows. “No gloves? No hand wraps?”

“Okay, you got me. You want all the gory details, then?”

“I wasn’t trying to pry. Are we in danger?”

He gets an ice pack from the freezer and presses his hand against it. “No.”

It’s obvious he doesn’t want to talk, and I get it. But I wish he would let me in. He plops down on the couch. I sit next to him. “You can talk to me, you know. If you ever want to.”

Alessio looks uncomfortable. “Thanks. Noted.”

“You really just keep it all inside, don’t you?”

He shrugs, not looking at me. “Safer that way.”

Safer for me? Or for you?

I decide to change the subject. “I visited my mom today.”

He looks surprised. “Oh? How was that?”

“Fine, I guess. She didn’t start screaming at me the moment I came in the door like I thought she might.”

“Did she say anything about your dad?”

It would be easy to assume that his question was out of interest in my life, but I know better. Any inside information about my father’s circumstances could be helpful to him. The biggest threat to his leadership is whatever power Anthony Gonzalez may or may not be wielding from his jail cell.

I shake my head. “No.”

The distance between us is killing me. I felt so close to him before, when we were exploring our sexual dynamic. But outside the bedroom, it's like there's a pane of glass between us. Like he's playing defense, preventing himself from getting too attached.

"Stand up."

My body reacts immediately to his tone. He's using what I call his "dom" voice—it's low and gravelly, with just enough edge to let me know his words are a command. I've become accustomed to it lately, and I obey him instinctively, standing up from the couch.

Alessio watches me with lidded eyes, looking satisfied for the first time since he walked in the door. He doesn't get up immediately, staying in his seat and watching me as I stand in front of him. I know better than to move, even though I feel awkward and vulnerable.

That would earn me a spanking, at minimum.

"Okay, let's get your collar," says my husband, standing up. He walks behind me and puts his hands on my upper arms, gripping them as he guides me forcefully to the bedroom.

I submit to his lead, my mind slipping into a familiar state of blissful surrender. There's no confusion here, no uncertainty. Just a very clear directive to obey. When Alessio dominates me, when he collars me, I know exactly who I am and what my place is. It's so easy to lose myself in that.

"Down," he orders, pushing me to my knees next to the bed. He retrieves the collar from the nightstand, and goosebumps prickles down my back as he fastens it around my neck.

"There, that's better," he whispers, stroking my face. I gulp as he clips on the leash. "Okay, follow me."

I try to stand up, but he stops me, a smirk on his face.

“No, you crawl.”

Cheeksburning, I try to stand up again, but he forces me back down and gives my ass a hard smack.

“If I have to tell you again, you’re going to be crawling with a sore ass and the plug inside you.”

A defiant growl wells up in my throat, but I force it back down.

“Good girl,” Alessio praises me. “I saw you surrendering to me there. Keep being good and you’ll get a reward for that.”

I have to swallow my pride as he walks me to the living room, keeping me on a short leash and spanking my ass if I slow down too much. He keeps me at his feet as he pours himself a whiskey, then sits down on the couch, having me kneel in front of him.

I feel like his little pet as he pulls out his phone and starts reading something on it, sipping the whiskey and holding my leash.

“Good girl,” he whispers, sending tingles through my scalp as he strokes my hair. “Very good girl.”

Wow, that feels so good. I sigh, starting to lose myself as warm fuzziness overtakes me.

But eventually, even his stroking fingers can’t stop the real world from intruding into my thoughts.

“Can you help me with something?” I mumble.

His face is so much softer now when he looks at me. It’s as though having me on a leash is bringing him a great sense of ease. “Maybe. What?”

“I told you that my dad got my acceptance to Bover City University canceled, right?”

A grimace. “Yeah, you told me.”

“You think you could get me back in?”

He frowns, but in a thinking way, not in a this-isn't-going-to-work way. He cups my chin as I look up at him. “Yeah, it could be possible.”

“Will you help? For me?”

Alessio pauses, looking down at me, and I'm worried he's going to refuse. But then he smiles, and his fingers return to stroking my hair. “Sure, Ave. I'll ask Sal to do some digging tomorrow, find out what leverage your dad pulled at BCU to fuck you over. Figure out whose toes we need to step on.”

“Thanks so much, Alessio!” I try to stand up, to give him a big kiss on the cheek, but he uses the leash to keep me in place. I settle for resting my head on his lap while he continues to stroke me.

Ayla

The next day, Alessio takes me to a strip club.

“And why exactly are we here?” I raise my eyebrows as he pulls into the parking lot.

“I told you, we're meeting with Uncle Sal.”

“In a strip club?”

He laughs, parking in one of the reserved spaces near the front. “Sal runs the joint. The back room is a good place for doing business.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, sure. Business.”

“Think what you want. You can’t honestly believe I would get any kind of stimulation out of coming here when I have you at home.”

Instead of the front entrance, he takes me through a side door. I won’t deny feeling a modicum of insecurity as he leads me through the narrow backstage area, past scantily clad dancers whose bodies seem so perfect to me. But by the time we reach the door to the back room, it’s obvious that I’ve paid far more attention to them than he has.

“Have a nice trip?” Sal asks, looking up. He’s sitting at his desk, watching sports on his laptop. He mutes the computer as we come in. “I like the vacation beard, kid. Very distinguished. And a very happy birthday to you, Mrs. Razione.”

Mrs. Razione-I’m still not used to hearing that. I blush at the memory of my birthday trip. “Thank you. It was really wonderful to get out of the city.”

“It was very nice,” says Alessio. “What did you find out?”

“I put Mr. Gary on it,” says Sal. “I thought you’d want someone doing the legwork who you trusted. He should be here any minute.”

“Very good,” says Alessio as the door opens and Dominguez joins us.

“Hey, how was the birthday trip?” asks Dominguez brightly, kissing me on the cheek.

“Really great,” I tell him, pushing down memories of being chased naked through the jungle.

He grins. “Well, I have a belated birthday present for you, in the form of some information. Your acceptance to Bover City University was rescinded over a violation of their social media policy. An admissions officer reported that he discovered social media posts of you engaging in unacceptable conduct.”

My mouth opens in shock. “What? What conduct? That’s total bullshit.”

“It gets better. The admissions officer who made the report is named Jacob Talbot. That same Jacob Talbot just so happens to owe almost \$200, 000 to your dad in gambling debt.”

Yup. That checks out. I’ve overheard enough conversations between my father and his associates to know how things get done. “So this guy made a fake report about me in exchange for clearing the money he owes?”

“You guessed it.” He looks at Alessio. “You want me to take care of it for you? I can get it done tonight.”

My husband thinks for a moment, then shakes his head. “No. I’ll do it myself.”

“You sure? One of the perks of being the boss is you get to delegate shit like this.” Dominguez glances at his friend’s bruised knuckles, and I wonder if he was there when those bruises happened.

“I know. But I’m going to take this one. It’s personal to me.”

“I’ll help you,” I say, and all three men turn to look at me.

“Out of the question,” replies my husband immediately. “I’m not putting you in danger.”

“You’re doing this on my behalf,” I insist. “I want to be a part of it.”

“I really don’t think it would be dangerous,” says Dominguez, earning a glare from Alessio. “Guy’s a 45-year-old office worker. Not like you’re running up on a cartel hitman or something.”

“And so that means I should bring mywifealong on business?”

I make eye contact with my husband. “Come on. You’re threatening this guy so he changes his report. He’s a BCU admissions officer, not some badass. Can you really argue this is more dangerous than our vacation?”

He holds my gaze, then chuckles, rubbing his forehead. "Fine, fine. My woman gets what she wants. We'll call it a date night. Just don't expect a candlelit dinner."

"Honeymoon, part two," Sal cracks.

Alessio parks near the University, and we walk through the campus together. It's bittersweet being here, considering how excited I was to attend. All the students around me would've been my classmates.

Hopefully, they will be someday.

We find Jacob Talbot's office in one of the administration buildings, then sit on a bench outside his door. We're waiting for him to come in or out so we can clock his appearance, then follow him when he leaves. After about 20 minutes, a stocky, middle-aged man with fading, disheveled hair comes out, holding a coffee mug.

"Mr. Partridge!" he says, addressing Alessio. "I'm so sorry, I thought I had you and your daughter scheduled for 3 o'clock. Do you want to come in?"

My face instantly feels hot at the assumption that I'm Alessio's daughter. He's been wearing a short beard since our trip, which I suppose does age him up a bit. But even so, it's a stark reminder of our age gap.

But my husband just smiles, glancing at me with amusement. "Yes, that would be great. You're Mr. Talbot?"

"Oh, please, call me Jacob." He ushers us inside the office and closes the door. "Sit down, sit down."

Jacob Talbot sits at his desk chair and puts down his empty coffee mug. Alessio remains standing. "This won't take long. You made an arrangement not too long ago with Anthony Gonzalez. You know what I'm talking about?"

Talbot stares for a moment, as though confused, then his face turns red.

“Anthony Gonzalez? The... gangster? He got arrested. I saw it on the news.”

“Yes. But before that, you had an arrangement with him.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Talbot stutters. “An arrangement? What kind of arrangement?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” says Alessio, dropping his tone. I almost squirm in place at the sound of his domvoice. Fuck, the effect it has on me. “You reversed his daughter’s acceptance.”

“He made me do it!” protests Talbot, dropping the pretense. “I don’t know why he wanted to screw over his daughter, it’s not my business. He said he would clear my debts. I only did what he said.”

“I understand that,” says Alessio calmly. “Now you’re going to undo it.”

“Undo it? You think I have a magic wand? It was hard enough to make it happen in the first place. I had to fake those pictures of her doing drugs.”

“You faked pictures of me doing drugs?” I say indignantly. “You motherfucker!”

His eyes widen as he recognizes me. “Shit, you’re Gonzalez’s daughter? Come on, what the fuck. Why is she here? I don’t have business with her. Gonzalez’s in jail. I thought this was over.”

Alessio steps forward. “Which means there’s a new boss in town. Whatever deal you had with Anthony Gonzalez is in the past. Now there’s a new deal: you do what I say. And what I say is you get Ayla Gonzalez back into school.”

Talbot gulps, then shakes his head. “Respectfully, my debt is clear. I don’t owe the...you guys anything anymore. I can’t get somebody back into school who we already denied for using drugs. So I’m...” He looks like he’s gathering his courage. “I’m going to ask both of you to leave.”

Alessio steps forward again, but then there's a knock, and the door opens. A bald, bearded man in his 50s pokes his head in. "I'm so sorry to interrupt. Is this Jacob Talbot's office? My daughter and I have a 3 o'clock appointment."

"You're not interrupting," says my husband, smiling. He turns over his shoulder and gives the admissions officer an icy stare. "We were just leaving."

"So, what do you think his story is?" I ask Alessio as we sit in his Tesla in the university parking lot. We're waiting for Talbot to walk out to his car, and I'm starting to get bored.

"Talbot? Not much of a story. Had a gambling problem, got in too deep with the mob. Needed to start doing favors to keep his head above water. I've seen it a hundred times before."

"Well, yeah, I know that part. But you know, what's his backstory? Like pretend he's in a movie?"

Alessio raises an eyebrow. "Are you trying to play a stakeout game?"

"Exactly. A stakeout game."

He shrugs. "You first."

I rub my hands together. "Okay, okay... He was married, two kids, but they divorced four years ago, and now he lives in a shitty apartment and only sees his daughters every other weekend. He tried online dating at first, but it didn't work out, so he turned to online gambling instead. Then gambling became a habit, and soon, he's spending every night at my dad's poker tables."

My husband stares at me. "You just came up with all that?"

"Well, I was thinking about it earlier. What do you think?"

"I think you should be a screenwriter."

“What’s your version?”

45

He bites his lip, thinking. “All right, let me see... I agree that he’s divorced, but it was a long time ago, like 10 years ago. See, he’s been an admissions officer at BCU this whole time, and his ex-wife found out he was taking bribes from wealthy families to let their kids into school. It turned into a big fight, and she left him over it. No kids. Ever since then, he’s just fallen further and further into degeneracy, taking bribes and then gambling them away.”

I grin. “Oh, that’s good. What about the daddy-daughter combo that came in after us? Were they bribing him?”

“Absolutely. The moment we left, Mr. Partridge handed over an envelope full of cash.”

I go quiet, my cheeks warming.

“What?” Alessio asks, noticing my silence.

“I don’t want to say it.”

He smirks. “You’re thinking about Talbot assuming you were my daughter?”

“Yeah.”

He wraps his fingers around my ponytail and pulls slightly, making me gasp. “Well, then he’d really hate seeing me do this.” He brings his lips to mine and kisses me with authority, leaving me breathless.

“I’m pretty sure he knows I’m not your daughter now,” I squeak, brain a little mushy from the kiss.

“Good,” says Alessio, still holding me by the ponytail. “Because I’m going to do it again.”

The kiss is insistent this time. I melt against him as his tongue enters my mouth.

Then I hear the sound of tapping from outside, and I jump. A campus security officer is standing next to our car, motioning to roll down the window.

Murder flashes in Alessio's eyes, but he controls it quickly. He rolls down his window and addresses the officer politely. "Good afternoon. Can I help you?"

"You can't be doing that here," says the campus security guy. "Sorry to interrupt. We got a report about some people loitering in their car. I have to ask you to leave now."

"No problem, officer," says Alessio. "Have a great rest of your day."

My face is bright red as we drive out of the parking lot. "Wait a second," I say, spotting something outside the window. "Slow down. That's him, right?"

As we exit the BCU parking lot, Jacob Talbot walks out to a blue BMW and puts his stuff in the backseat.

"Blue Beemer," he says, eyes narrowing. "Can you write down the license plate on your phone?"

We follow Jacob Talbot into a wealthy suburban neighborhood. "I'm getting 'married with kids' vibes if he lives here," I remark. "Definitely two incomes. Looks like we were both wrong."

"Don't be so sure," says Alessio. "I don't think he's going home. Look. That house already has three cars in the driveway."

From a safe distance, we watch Talbot park his car and go into a well-lit home. Alessio parks on the other side of the street, hidden from view by a large SUV. When Talbot comes out about 10 minutes later, he's holding a briefcase.

“What do you think is in the briefcase?” I ask, continuing the game.

“Cash,” says Alessio with a shrug. “He’s taking a bribe to let some rich kid into BCU without the grades.”

“I can’t even tell if you’re joking or not.”

“I’m not. Can’t be easy to fund a gambling addiction like his, even on a private school salary. Stay in the car. I’ll be right back.”

Alessio

“What’s in the briefcase?” I ask, leaning against the blue BMW.

Jacob Talbot startles. “Oh, fuck, you scared me. Who is that?” His eyes widen as he recognizes me. “You? What are you... Fuck, hey, man, I don’t want any trouble.”

“Neither do I. What’s in the briefcase?”

“I... I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

I sigh, draw the gun from my belt, and point it at his head. “Is it my business now?”

Talbot goes pale. “Please don’t shoot. I have kids.”

“You want to see them again, you keep your voice down and get in the fucking car.”

Ayla

I watch as Alessio strides back to me, holding the briefcase. He passes it to me through the window. “We’re going to hang onto this for now. You okay driving? Mr. Talbot has agreed that I’ll ride in his vehicle, and you can follow.”

“Okay. Where are we going?”

“To his apartment. We’re going to have a chat.”

He crosses the street again and gets into the backseat of the BMW, behind Talbot. I imagine that the whole time they’re driving, Alessio will be holding a gun at his back. They pull out, and I follow them through the city to a block of high-rise apartment buildings. The BMW goes into a garage, and I park next to it.

“Up to your apartment,” Alessio orders Talbot, fully giving off that “dom” aura now. “Babe, you mind taking the briefcase?”