

## THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

He brushes a finger over my clit, and my flesh ripples in response. He smiles. "I think she does want attention. I can do that. I can do that."

Alessio slides down to the floor, kneeling in front of the couch. My legs start to close, and he forces them back open, giving my pussy a slap. "Don't close them. If it happens again, you're getting a spanking."

I nod, thighs quivering as I hold my legs as far apart as I can. He makes approving eye contact, then starts to kiss my inner thighs and pussy lips, everywhere except for my clit.

Oh, fuck. He loves teasing me like this. Giving me almost what I want, but not quite. I would hate him for it if I didn't love it so much. The orgasms he gives me after a round of teasing are hard to even describe.

He kisses his way up one of my thighs, all the way to the knee, then back down. Then he does the other thigh while I glare at him. He just smirks. "You're going to get what you want when I decide, not when you decide."

When he finally wraps his lips around my clit, I'm ready to burst.

I moan into the ball gag, throwing my head back. His lips and tongue explore my bundle of nerves, each tiny movement sending pleasure sizzling through my body.

"You have my permission to come whenever you get there," he growls, making eye contact. "Just this one time."

All I can do is moan in response, my climax building. He keeps his face buried between my legs, licking and sucking me as I squirm my pussy against him.

Even though he already gave me permission, I still imagine myself asking for it, and him granting it to me, as I come. At this point, it's just part of the routine, and I like it. It makes me feel connected to him. I like that my orgasms are for him.

I writhe on the couch as the pleasure tears through me, burning down everything else. Before my pussy is even finished twitching, Alessio is unbuckling, and then thrusting himself inside me.

"Oh, fuckkkkk," I gasp as he pulls the gag out of my mouth. "Oh my god, Alessio..."

He grips my thighs, face screwed up with concentration as he fucks me with everything he has. His shirt hangs open and I see his abs flexing with every thrust, the V-lines that lead down to his crotch rippling.

"Yes," he grunts, closing his eyes. "Oh, fuck yes..."

His cock twitches inside me, filling me with a spreading warmth. He pulls it out, shooting the next couple of ropes all over my pussy, navel, and boobs. Some of it even reaches my neck. He looks down at me with satisfaction in his eyes.

Mine, is what I want him to say. But he doesn't. His face hardens, and he takes a deep breath.

"I'm going to the gym."

What? He's leaving? Now? I have no idea how to respond to that. I want to cuddle. To talk to him. To feel close.

"Is the gym open this late?" I ask lamely, swallowing my hurt feelings.

"The one downstairs is 24 hours."

“Will you be gone long?”

“I might be. Feel free to go to bed without me if I get back too late.”

Alessio

The next day, I get a call from Sal. “Bad news, boss,” he tells me. “Couple of our boys got into it with some Irish kids at a South Side bar. No one killed, but there were some injuries. Tensions pretty high.”

I take a deep breath. “Okay. Have your people on alert. Have you been able to get in touch with Colin Maroney?”

“Yeah, I put out a feeler. He wants to meet. One on one. Not sure if it’s a good idea.”

“Tell him I’m amenable to a meeting if we pick a neutral location.”

“You sure about that? Colin’s a real tough customer.”

I think of Ayla, trapped at home until this business concludes. “I’m sure. I need this bullshit over with.”

Ayla

That afternoon, I decide to leave Alessio’s apartment. I don’t need groceries or anything, and honestly, I’m not even really going stir crazy yet.

What I want is to get his attention.

There’s a bubble tea shop right across the street from the penthouse, and it has outdoor seating. I get myself a drink and sit outside at one of the tables, somewhere I know he’ll see me as he pulls into the parking garage. Is it immature? Maybe. But I know it’s going to get me punished, which is what I want.

Last night felt bad. By the time Alessio finally came back from his “workout,” I had been in bed for at least an hour. And he barely spoke a word to me this morning before leaving the house.

In the back of my mind, my father’s words continue to haunt me. If Alessio knows something about our engagement that he hasn’t told me, that hurts. But not as much as him pulling away. In the aftermath of the car bomb, all I want is the security of our growing closeness.

At least if I earn a spanking, he’ll be forced to focus on me again.

I watch the street nervously, my eyes catching on every Tesla that passes by. Then I realize he doesn’t have a Tesla anymore, just a rental car I haven’t seen. Shit, I won’t even know when he gets home. This is slightly nerve-racking.

Alessio will probably be angry with me, scold me for putting myself in danger. Except I’m not! He admitted himself that this neighborhood is safe. And I know from growing up in the mob life that families aren’t targets.

I shift in my seat, unable to relax. I’m expecting to have a very sore ass by the time I go to bed tonight.

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Alessio

My vision catches on something as I pull my rental car into the garage at my penthouse. It’s the cafe across the street. The woman sitting at the table outside looks surprisingly like...

It is. God dammit. My eyes narrow as I recognize Ayla, looking pretty as anything in a short white skirt and tights, sipping her drink. The moment I park my car, I get out and cross the street.

Ayla sees me coming down the sidewalk, and I can tell she's been expecting me. Jesus Christ. She's only been at home for two days and she's already breaking the rules I set down for her. Is she trying to get herself fucking killed?

There are going to be consequences. Serious ones.

"How's your boba?" I ask, stopping in front of her table.

"Pretty good," she says, eyeing me guiltily. "I figured since I didn't leave the neighborhood, and you said the neighborhood was safe-"

I silence her with a look. She shudders, glancing down at her drink, and then at me.

"We're going home," I say, holding out my hand."Now."

She shudders again, then stands up and takes my outstretched hand. We cross the street, and I don't let go of her until it's time to unlock the front door.

Once we're inside, the tension is palpable. Ayla knows she's in trouble, and she's waiting on my word.

Yeah, she's in trouble, all right.

The moment our shoes are off, I grab her by the waist, drag her over to the living room, and throw her over my knee.

"Hey!" she protests as I flip up her skirt and yank down her tights, exposing her ass. Her perky cheeks tempt me, separated only by the thin strip of a turquoise thong.

Right now, though, I'm worried about more than sex. The skin on her ass is currently pale, but soon it will be red with my handprints.

"I think I made the rules very clear," I growl, delivering hard spanks to each of her cheeks. "You knew exactly where you were going to end up, leaving the apartment like that. Right here. Right fucking here."

Ayla starts struggling, trying to get away, but I hold her in place, pinning her arms behind her back.

“Bad girl. You don’t try to get away from me when I’m punishing you. You just made things a lot worse for yourself.”

I pepper her ass with spanks until she whimpers, then hook my fingers under the waistband of her panties. She tries to stop me, managing to pull one of her hands away from my grasp, but I just pin it again, giving her ass a hard slap for the trouble.

“You want to be a bad girl, you’re going to get punished like one.”

Pinning her wrists with one hand, I use the other to work her panties down her legs. They dangle at her knees along with her tights, her pussy now fully exposed to me. She squirms in place, grunting with frustration.

“You knew damn well this would happen,” I hiss furiously, stroking two fingers from the back of her knee all the way up to her hips. “You were testing me. Testing the boundaries.”

“Maybe,” she admits.

“Well, congratulations, you got what you wanted. Now you deal with the consequences. I hope the boba was fucking worth it.”

With that, I start methodically spanking her ass, pulling my hand back and then slapping it down with force. She yelps with every impact, butt jiggling pleasingly. I focus on the left cheek, and then the right, going back and forth, and soon, a red handprint starts to form on either side.

“We are on the verge of a fucking mob war,” I growl, continuing to punish her. “My job is to keep you safe. And that means”-I punctuate my words with a spank-“you stay!”-smack-“in!”-smack-“this!”-smack-“apartment!”

I finish with a hearty spank across both cheeks, giving Ayla a chance to catch her breath.

“Okay, fine,” she grumbles, trying to get off of my lap.

I chuckle grimly, holding her in place, then remove her tights as she struggles. “Did I say your punishment was over? You keep your ass exactly the fuck where it is.”

“I think you’re just being-” Ayla’s words are cut off as I stuff her panties into her mouth. She glares at me, quivering.

I sink my fingers into the back of her hair and push her head down into the couch. “You don’t disobey me, Ayla. Not in situations like this. There are cute infractions, and there are serious ones. This is a serious one. The most important rule I have is preserving your safety. There will always be firm consequences for breaking that rule.”

I return to spanking her, making sure that she feels every swat. Soon, she’s yelping and whimpering, her ass cheeks a bright shade of crimson. I keep the punishment going until I can see the surrender, feel that she’s nearing her breaking point.

“Spread your legs for me,” I order, roughly squeezing one of her cheeks.

She surrenders meekly, sniffling with her panties still in her mouth. Her legs part, and I see that her pussy is very wet.

“I’m going to give you pussy spansks, and you’re going to count. If I take your panties out of your mouth, are you going to be a good girl and count for me?”

She nods, face red.

“Okay. Show me that you’re submitting now, and I’ll only give you 15 swats instead of 25.”

She groans, earning a spank.

“Enough of that. Full submission, or this punishment is going to last a lot longer.”

Her shoulders slump, and even though a gentle growl rumbles in her throat, she nods her head.

I take the panties out and give her pussy a slap. She moans, trembling.

“One,” Ayla whimpers, voice shaking.

“Good girl. Keep counting for me.” I spank her pussy again.

“Two...”

We get all the way up to 12 before I sense any hesitance. But on the 13th slap, she pauses several seconds before saying the number.

“Ayla,” I growl, squeezing her hair. “Am I going to have to start over?”

“No,” she says hurriedly, as though snapping out of it. “Thirteen.”

I smirk, allowing my finger to brush against her clit and enjoying the resulting twitch. “That’s what I thought. Two more. Count.”

I pause, drawing out the tension, and then deliver the 14th swat.

“Fourteen,” my wife whimpers.

For a moment I just examine her on my lap, all of her delicate parts splayed out before me. She’s so much smaller than me, so soft and feminine. I just want to touch her and rule her and own her all the time.

Then the memory of my Tesla exploding flashes into my mind, accompanied by that awful pang of loss I’ve never been able to escape. I can’t feel that again. Not with her.

As long as Ayla is with me, I won’t ever be safe.

“Fifteen,” she gasps as I deliver the final hit. “Sir.”

A satisfied growl rumbles in my throat at the word.

Sir.

I'm going to miss that. Badly.

I pat her ass, then motion for her to stand up. "Okay. I'm going to get your plug now."

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Ayla

"Be a good girl and spread yourself for me, Ayla."

My cheeks burn. My face-cheeks from embarrassment, my ass-cheeks from his punishment.

My clit is burning, too, but that's a different story.

"Ayla. If I have to say it again, you're going back over my knee."

I hurry to obey him, burying my face in the bed. I'm lying on my stomach in our bedroom now, my skirt pushed up to reveal my bare ass. Alessio stands over me, tall and authoritative, and I feel so owned by him. He's completely calling the shots now, his presence commanding my total attention after he humbled me with the spanking.

"Good girl." I feel lube dribble on my tight hole, and then the pressure of the plug. It's cold at first, but quickly warms as it slips inside.

"Oh fuck," I whimper, feeling the plug seat itself inside me.

"Hands behind your back," Alessio orders.

I obey him. He pins them there, climbing on top of me and unbuckling his pants with the other hand.

My breathing gets faster as his cock pushes against my opening. When he slides it inside, I cry out at the sudden sensation of fullness. I try to move my hands, but I can't. He's pinning them firmly in place.

"I own you," my husband growls. "All of you. And I can't have you disobeying me. Not if I'm going to keep you safe."

I moan, in a state of blissful surrender now. This is what I wanted. For him to take me, to show me who I am to him. To prove how important he considers me, even if the delivery of the message is rough and dominating.

Especially if the delivery of the message is rough and dominating. This is what I crave most, I'm realizing. I need this. To my soul, I trust that Alessio cares about my safety, my well-being, my worth. So in surrendering myself to him, I don't feel fearful or insecure.

I feel cared about. Protected. Valued.

Loved.

Alessio fucks me roughly, until his cock is throbbing and I can tell he's on the verge of climax. Then he removes the plug, slides his cock into my ass, still wet from my pussy, and thrusts until he slumps forward, draining his seed into me. His ragged groan of pleasure is right next to my ear, sending goosebumps down my neck.

When his breathing slows, he pulls out and gives my ass a little pat. "Good girl, Ayla. Now spread yourself again so I can put the plug back in."

I lie curled against Alessio, very aware of the plug in my ass, sticky with his cum. I feel deeply content right now. Like this is where I was made to be.

"I got something today," he tells me, reaching over to the nightstand. "And it's a good thing, too. Clearly, it's needed." I watch as he produces a thin metal ring about the diameter of my neck. "Any guesses on what this is?"

“It looks like a collar,” I say, cheeks reddening.

“That’s correct. Want to guess what’s special about it?”

“Uh, it’s made of metal instead of leather?”

He swings a hinge that blended so seamlessly into the metal, I didn’t even see it. The collar opens. I lean forward, allowing him to place it around my neck, then he clips it shut.

“Try to take it off.”

I try, but I can’t. I can’t even find the hinge in the back, no matter how much I search with my fingers.

“It won’t open without a key,” he tells me. “This little hole right here?” He points out a tiny speck that I can’t even see from my angle. “This is how I open it. That’s the first special thing about it.”

Fuck. A collar that I literally can’t take off. That’s... intense. Unbidden, my pussy gives a satisfied twitch. “What’s the second thing?” I ask, voice trembling slightly.

“It has a tracking device. Anywhere you go, I’ll be able to see it in real time on a map.”

My jaw drops. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. And after today, I think we can both see why that’s a good idea.”

“You’re fucking crazy,” I tell him, even though the obsession behind that gesture scratches a very deep itch.

“Maybe I am, but I’ll be a little less crazy if I can check on you and know that you’re safe.”

“Knowing where I am isn’t the same as knowing that I’m safe.”

He gulps, his expression turning to stone. “Well, I’ll take it. That, plus getting you out of the state.”

I roll my eyes. “I thought we were done with that.”

“We were. Not anymore. Not after today.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. “What?”

“Ayla, our agreement was that you would stay at home in the apartment. The whole point was to protect you, and the rules were very clear. But you broke them. I can’t have this betrayal.”

“Betrayal? Oh, come on. Look, I’m sorry, okay? You already punished me. I won’t do it again.”

“No, you won’t. Because you’ll be living in Oregon, or Washington, or Rhode Island, or somewhere other than here. Whatever danger I’m in, you won’t be in it anymore. You’ll be safe.”

“Oh, come on, that’s such a bullshit excuse. I grew up with a mob boss. My dad never sent us out-of-state just because there was some trouble going on. That’s what the vacation house was for, remember? The one you burned down?”

Alessio steels his face. “Ayla, do you realize what would have happened if we’d been closer to the car when that bomb went off? You would have been blown to pieces. I would have been picking your charred body parts off the ground.”

“No you wouldn’t. Because you’d be dead, too.” I realize as I’m saying it that I’m not making a very convincing point.

“And that makes it better?”

“No, I just...” I break off, frustrated. I don’t know how to say what I want to. We’re supposed to be a team. Doesn’t he get why this hurts me? I search my

husband's gaze for understanding, but there is none. I can't find even a hint of love in his face.

My eyes well up, as much as I try to stop them. I don't understand why he's treating me like this. All I know is that my husband sending me away makes me feel deeply, painfully unwanted. It confirms everything I always suspected.

He thinks I'm his weakness, not his strength.

"Won't you miss me?"

Alessio doesn't meet my eyes. "I'll be busy. Making sure this city is safe for us. For our children."

His words sting, even though he's just verifying what I knew about our relationship from the very beginning. I'm not a partner to him, I'm a baby-making device. I don't know how I let myself hope for more than that. Because the sex was good? Because I liked it when he spanked me?

Pathetic. I should have known better.

My voice comes out harsh, almost mocking. "Is that really why you wanted to marry me? To send me away when it's convenient for you, and then bring me back when it's time to make babies? Was that really worth all the fucking effort? Oh wait, of course it was. You got to take over the Gonzalez family. What could possibly be more important than that?"

Alessio's dead expression morphs suddenly into a mask of rage. "Wanted to marry you? Wanted to marry you? I never wanted to marry you. That's what my grandfather wanted. I did what I was told."

My eyes sting as salty tears pour down my cheeks. That shouldn't hurt so much to hear, but it cuts me to my core. Somehow, I actually let myself believe that he desired me for me. "I guess that makes two of us who didn't want to get married. Congratulations, you've made two people miserable."

His lip twitches at my words, but I can't understand the emotions behind it. He doesn't respond, doesn't even look at me.

I can't resist the opportunity to get in another dig. No use keeping anything hidden now. "I guess I never really had a chance, did I? Considering you've been planning to marry me since I was a fucking kid. At least you waited for me to become an adult before you swooped in."

He stands up furiously from the bed. "I don't know what bullshit story you've concocted in your head, and I don't care."

"Are you really going to insult me by denying it?"

"Ayla, you don't know what you're talking about."

"Like I would believe you," I snap. "As though you've ever been open or honest with me a day in your life."

He throws up his hands. "Fuck this. You have until tomorrow to pick a state, or I'm picking for you. Pack your goddamn bags."

Alessio stomps out of the room. A minute later, I hear the dull thought of his throwing knife embedding itself in its target. Or maybe the wall.

I scream into my pillow, helpless, trapped, and lost.

Ayla

I don't say much to Dominguez as he drives me to the airport the next day. It hurts that Alessio wouldn't even do it himself, but I know that isn't his friend's fault. I wonder if he knows about the fight we had. Do they talk about things like that?

“Fly safe,” says Dominguez, pulling my suitcase out of his trunk as he drops me off. “To wherever you’re going.”

“Thanks,” I reply dully. “I’m sure I’m going to have lots of fun in-”

“Don’t tell me,” he interrupts me quickly. “No one but Alessio is allowed to know.”

“Jesus, you don’t think that’s a little over-the-top?”

I’m relieved that his reaction is more amused than serious. “It doesn’t matter what I think. He gave a clear order.”

“Oh, come on! He’s being ridiculous and you know it.”

“Maybe. You could take it as a compliment.”

“That he’d rather send me to a different state than have me at home?”

Dominguez takes a deep breath. “Think what you want. But I’ve never seen him like this before.”

“Like what?”

He closes the trunk, then shakes his head. “Have a good flight, Ayla.”

I know my collar could probably pass for jewelry, but I’m still wearing a turtleneck to cover it. When I get to security, I’m anxious that it’s going to set off the metal detector. It doesn’t, to my relief. I guess Alessio would have thought of that.

My ticket is to Boise, Idaho. Not what I would’ve picked, but I guess that’s what happens when you leave the decision to someone else. I couldn’t bring myself to name a location. It would have felt like endorsing this whole idea.

Not that I have any intention of staying in Boise.

I buy myself an overpriced blueberry muffin and a vanilla latte in the airport with Alessio's credit card, which he gave me before sending me away. The muffin is good, at least. The best part of my morning.

Travelers pulling suitcases breeze past me as I take the moving sidewalk to my gate. For a moment, I think about trying to refund my ticket. I could probably do it, and catch a different flight instead. Alessio wouldn't be able to stop me.

The idea is certainly tempting.

But no. Not yet.

Not while I'm still wearing the tracker.

Alessio

My phone rings, and I pick up quickly. I'm in a shitty fucking mood, so whatever this is will be a welcome distraction.

I didn't like having the penthouse to myself this morning. It felt wrong. It felt... empty.

Sal's voice greets me. "Maroney wants to meet tonight. Are we in?"

"Where?"

"He suggested the carnival. Seems okay to me."

I think it through. The Bover City Carnival is a year-round amusement park with rides, games, and other activities of that sort. Neutral territory. It's always filled with people, and there's a security station at the entrance. As far as meeting spots go, it checks the right boxes.

"Tell him I'll be there. 8 o'clock."

"You got it, boss."

I put down the phone and pick up my throwing knife. Meeting with Colin Maroney isn't something I look forward to, but it has to be done. I have two goals: to confirm that he's the one who arranged the car bomb, and to make a decision on whether my family needs to go to war.

Thunk!

My knife misses the target again.

Fuck it. Let the wall have holes.

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I've never met Colin Maroney before, but his reputation is that he's mean. Similar vibes as Gio the Butcher. I show up to the amusement park with Dominguez and a small coterie of bodyguards, expecting Maroney to do the same. He's waiting there at the entrance, surrounded by his own muscle.

"So there's the young buck," he greets me, smiling coolly. His goons chuckle appreciatively. Suck ups.

Colin Maroney is at least 10 years older, with flaming red hair and an equally vibrant beard. He wears a black tracksuit, the sleeves pushed up just enough to reveal the tattoos climbing down each of his arms.

I shake his hand. "Why don't we leave our people behind and go play some carnival games."

"Yes, why don't we? Can I call you Alessio?"

We go through security and into the park, almost like we're friends. I'm more dressed up than he is, in dark jeans and a black button-up. I'm overdressed for the situation, truthfully, but I don't feel right in a T-shirt. Not when I'm acting as the boss. I sure as shit never saw Nonno in a T-shirt.

"So, you want me dead," I say without preamble. It's more of a statement than a question.

Maroney laughs. “So dramatic! What could possibly have given you that impression?”

“I had some trouble with my Tesla the other day. Thought you might know something about it.”

“You’d have to talk to an electric car mechanic. I drive a truck.”

“How’s your gas mileage?”

“Bad, but I can afford it. You have any trouble finding charging stations?”

“Not anymore.”

We walk through a row of carnival games, all blasting music and flashing lights. To our right, a pair of teenagers compete to shoot red stars from their paper targets using the BB guns mounted on the counter.

“I used to like that game when I was a kid,” Maroney remarks. “Always wondered if you could find a way to detach the BB gun and start shooting people. You ever wonder that?”

“No.”

He shrugs. “Fair enough. I guess I’m the only sick fuck.”

“Not in our line of work.”

“I suppose not. The sick fucks are always the dangerous ones.”

He lets his words hang as we keep walking through the crowd.

“I’m going to need you to stay out of my territory in South Bover,” I tell him. “That means Razone neighborhoods and Gonzalez neighborhoods. It’s all mine now.”

He stops. “Is that so? Hold on. I’m going to get a funnel cake.”

Maroney is a confusing mix of threatening and disarming. He has more charm than Gio the Butcher, I'll give him that. I wait next to him on line for his funnel cake.

"Want a piece?" he offers. "Come on, you know it looks good."

Fuck it. I rip off a piece of his funnel cake, covered in powdered sugar, and I can't deny that it's delicious. I should come here with Ayla some time.

Ayla.

...Fuck.

"You want to talk about that fight at the bar between our boys?" Maroney asks when he's finished eating.

I scowl. "Honestly, I don't care. That's not what I'm here about. Kids will have their bar fights. But if you and I have a problem, I'm going to piss on your fucking corpse. I will not accept a thorn in my side, do you understand me?"

I hold eye contact long enough to make my point. My organization is bigger than his, considerably. An all-out war isn't good for either of us, but it's worse for him.

His face is impassive. "How about we ride the Ferris wheel, huh? I haven't done that since I was a teenager."

"Why not," I reply with a shrug.

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The Ferris wheel operator looks us over as we get in, me in my dark shirt with buttons, him in his tracksuit. A mismatched pair, united only by profession. Maroney and I take seats across from each other in the gondola, a small, enclosed pod with a maximum capacity of four.

He gazes out the window as the ride starts up. "This is nostalgic, isn't it? Did you come to the carnival when you were little?"

"No," I tell him. "We weren't really a carnival family."

"Ah, yeah. I remember your old man was a real hard-ass. Such a shame, what happened to Andres and your mom."

I try not to react at the mention of my father. It hadn't occurred to me that Maroney would have been around long enough to have met him. I wonder if they ever did business together.

The Ferris wheel stops when we reach the top, presumably for more people to get on. I look out over the carnival with the city behind it, the colorful lights gleaming in the night. I know Ayla would like this view.

The sound of Maroney rustling underneath his seat causes me to turn. When I look back at him, he's pointing a silenced pistol at me.

"Sorry for the surprise," he chuckles, standing up. "And no, if you're wondering, this Ferris wheel won't start turning again until I give the word."

I've had guns pointed at me lots of times. Probably more times than I could count on all my fingers. But it's never scared me before.

This time, when I see the gun in Maroney's hand, it terrifies me.

If he kills me, I'll never see Ayla again.

She's probably getting to the hotel room I booked for her in Boise right now, maybe unpacking her suitcase, maybe getting out of the Uber. She probably hates me. Probably thinks she means nothing to me at all, that the only thing I see in her is a womb and a convenient last name.

I have to tell her she means more to me than that.

Suddenly, to have her so far away from me is devastating. I've been so worried about losing her, so worried about protecting myself from the pain, that I didn't notice she was already gone.

If I never see Ayla again, she'll never know what she truly meant to me. She'll never know about the future I wanted us to have together.

"It's an honor, really," says Maroney, standing up. "Getting to clip Andres Razone's son. And Nazio Razone's grandson. Long line of hard hitters you come from, kid. Hope you know it's only business." He presses the tip of the silencer into my mouth. The metal is cold, and it tastes like smoke.

The image of my wife's face is burned into my brain as I launch into movement, all the tension inside me releasing like a slingshot. I swat the gun to the side, trying desperately to move my head out of the way as the crack of the silencer momentarily fills the enclosed space.

A sharp pain rings through my head, but I ignore it. I have to get the gun. Maroney grunts with exertion as I try to pry it out of his hands, then he throws a hard knee to my body, knocking the wind out of me. It's all I can do to keep from crumbling, but somehow, I stay upright. I gasp for air, fingers scrambling around the handle of the pistol.

"Fuckin' piece of shit," the Irish mobster snarls, throwing another knee. This one catches me too, right in the liver, and I can barely breathe as I keep fighting him with everything I have.

Somehow, I pry his fingers open, and the gun drops. His eyes go wide. Both of us dive for it.

He gets there first. Because I let him. The moment his hand reaches the weapon, I stomp on it as hard as I can, receiving vicious satisfaction as I feel the fingers break. He cries out, still bent over, and I grab his head and slam my knee into it.

The gondola swings as Maroney sprawls backward into one of the seats. I pick up the gun and dump the entire magazine into him. Crack crack crack crack crack crack crack crack crack. Bullets rip into his chest, blood exploding from hole after hole and spattering the inside of the Ferris wheel car.

After about 30 seconds, the Ferris wheel starts moving again. I don't know if somebody heard the commotion, or if Maroney's corrupt operator just couldn't keep it paused for any longer. It doesn't matter. I wipe down the gun with my shirt to remove my fingerprints and drop it on the floor.

When my gondola gets to the bottom, I pull up my undershirt to cover my face and sprint out, shoving through the crowd before anybody can recognize me or see what I've left behind. I fly through the exit, run several blocks, then call Dominguez as police cars speed past me, their lights and sirens cutting through the night.

"You okay?" he asks. "They're shutting down the amusement park right now, some kind of emergency. Police are coming. We're on our way out. Did you have something to do with that?"

"Colin Maroney is dead," I tell him flatly.

"Oh, fuck. Okay. Did you plan that?"

"No. He forced my hand. Are any of his men still hanging around?"

"A few of them, yeah. They're trying to call Maroney. I don't think they know about whatever just went down."

I take a deep breath, pulling up the app on my phone that allows me to check on Ayla's location. "Kill them."

\*\*\*

I call an Uber to take me home, then wait on a bench for it to arrive. The nights are getting chilly now, but I don't feel it. I'm too hopped up on adrenaline. My ride shows up, and I get into the backseat.

The driver, a skinny kid wearing too much cologne, looks back and stares with a shocked expression on his face. "Uh, mister, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, why?"

He gapes at me. "Your... ear..."

I put my hand to the side of my head, suddenly aware of a painful stinging. My fingers come back red and slippery.

When I look at my reflection in the window next to me, I discover that there's a hole in my left ear.

"Do you want me to take you to a hospital?" asks the driver, still staring.

I grimace. "No. Same location."

"Are... are you sure? That looks pretty bad."

"It's nothing. I was going through the park, must have snagged it on a branch. You keep gauze in your glovebox or anything? Ibuprofen?"

"Sir, this is an Uber, not an ambulance."

I resist the urge to swear. Now that I'm aware of it, the hole Colin Maroney just shot in my ear is killing me. "Okay, change of plan. Can you take me to the nearest drugstore?"

I've only just managed to stop the bleeding when Dominguez meets me outside of Rite Aid. "Jesus, what happened to your ear?"

"It's nothing. Can't even feel it."

"It looks pretty bad."

"You should have seen the other guy."

"I assume the other guy was Maroney?"

"Yeah. Trust me, he looks worse."

We get into Dominguez's car. He takes my bag of first-aid supplies and starts dressing my ear. "What happened?"

"It was a setup. He had a gun stashed, almost got me with it. Had somebody on the inside at the carnival."

"And nobody saw you kill him?"

"It was on the Ferris wheel."

"You rode the Ferris wheel with him?"

"I'm not saying it was my brightest idea."

Dominguez chuckles darkly, taping a big wad of gauze over my ear. "Well, I guess it worked out. No need to wonder where we stand with the Maroney crew."

I clench my fist, trying not to wince. Thank god the ibuprofen is kicking in. "Do you have any trouble with his boys on the way out?"

He shakes his head. "They never saw it coming. This is going to draw attention, you know. Multiple killings at an amusement park."

"Good. It can stand as a warning."

“What do you want to do about Maroney’s gang? Some of them might roll over now, but his brother Declan is going to want revenge. He’ll be in charge now with Colin gone.”

“We’re taking out Declan. Tonight.”

Dominguez raises his eyebrows. “Man, remind me never to piss you off. You sure you don’t want to go home and rest that ear?”

“Tonight. Before the dust has settled. We’re cutting off the head and the neck.”

\*\*\*

Flashing blue and red lights greet us as we pull up outside Declan Maroney’s house. Ordinarily, pulling off a hit in a neighborhood like this would be far too dangerous to consider. But I called in a favor for this one.

“You got a warrant?” comes a loud voice from the front door. A uniformed police officer stands on the doorstep, says something, then enters the house. Dominguez and I wait in the front seat of his car, warming our hands with the hot air blowing from the heater.

A few minutes later, the cop comes out, this time dragging a handcuffed man wearing sweats and a familiar shock of red hair.

“I’ll be out of there in no time!” Declan Maroney barks. “You got nothing on me!”

The officer doesn’t take Declan to his patrol car, pulling him instead to our vehicle parked right behind it. I make eye contact with Dominguez and we get out.

“What are you doing?” The Irish mobster starts to panic. “What the fuck is going on?”

“One more word and you’re getting tasered,” growls the cop. He turns to me. “Nobody’s going to find him, right? I don’t want this coming back to bite me in the ass.”

I shake my head. “Don’t worry about it. If anything gets found, it will be far from here, and it won’t be identifiable.”

“Okay. No offense, but I’m getting the fuck out of here.”

“I appreciate this, Paul. You’re going to like your Christmas bonus this year, trust me.”

Declan takes this opportunity to make a run for it. Immediately, Paul pulls his taser and shoots him in the back. The barbs pierce his sweatshirt and he collapses, twitching.

Dominguez smirks. “Good shooting, officer.”

Paul shakes his head, then gets into his patrol car and drives off.

I glance down at Declan Maroney as he twitches on the ground, then back at my friend. “Okay, let’s get him in the car.”

Ayla

My morning starts in a hotel room in Boise, Idaho. The place is nice enough, at least. Not that I intend to stay here. I grab breakfast at the Denny’s across the street, then find a hardware store on my phone and take an Uber there.

An employee greets me as I enter, a kind-looking older fellow. “Good day, ma’am. Looking for anything in particular?”

“Uh, yeah. Can you recommend a good pair of bolt cutters?”

He gestures for me to follow him. “Oh, yeah, definitely. What do you need to cut through? Wire? Rebar?”

My fingers play with the metal collar, hidden by my turtleneck. “Maybe... something in between?”

He stops midway down an aisle and points. “Well, here’s your bolt cutters. We’ve got big and small, all depends on what kind of project you’re doing.”

“Thanks,” I say, picking one off the shelf that seems to be the right size. “I think this one will do.”

\*\*\*

Alessio

I sit down at an airport bar, waiting for my flight.

I’m on my way to Boise.

With Colin Maroney and his brother both out of the way, I feel confident that the danger has passed. I put Sal in charge of mopping things up while I’m out of town, with Dominguez as his number two.

It’s time to get my wife back.

Obsessively, I check Ayla’s location on my phone for about the seventh time today. She went out for breakfast earlier and did some shopping, and now she’s back in her hotel room. Perfect. I’ll be with her by nightfall as long as my flight doesn’t get delayed.

A news report from the TV in the corner catches my ear: “Thanks, Dave. I’m standing now outside the Bover City Carnival, which is closed today after scenes of shocking violence erupted last night. Authorities are now confirming multiple execution-style shootings, which are believed to be the result of gang activity. We can confirm that 43-year-old Colin Maroney, alleged leader of the Maroney Gang, is among the victims...”

“You know I was just there?” says the guy next to me, nursing his beer. “Two days ago. Came there with my kids, won some stuffed animals playing carnival games. Can’t believe what happened.”

I sip my soda water. “Yeah, it’s something,” I agree. “I was there recently, too.”

\*\*\*

When my plane lands in Boise, the first thing I do is check Ayla’s location. I’m pleased to see that she’s still in her hotel room. I head straight there from the airport, eager to see her. The whole time, I’m practicing what I’m going to say to her. How I’m going to apologize.

I need her to know that I married her because I wanted it. That ever since I met her, I haven’t been the same. That whenever I look at her, my heart feels like it’s going to burst.

It won’t be easy to admit any of that. I never have before. To anyone.

But she’s worth it. She’s worth facing my fear, accepting the risk of loss, of pain.

She’s worth everything I’ve done. And everything I’m going to do.

I booked her room for two, of course. And I reserved it with my credit card, which means all I have to do is go to the front office and ask for a key. I take the elevator, walk through the hallway, over the ugly carpet, and pause in front of her door.

We haven’t been apart for very long, but it feels like years.

I knock.

No answer.

After a minute, I knock again. Still nothing. Is there a light coming from under the door? It’s hard to tell.

Okay, well, that's what the key is for. I slide the card into the slot, wait for the green light to flash, and open the door.

The room is empty. But I swear I just checked her location. Baffled, I pull out my phone, open the app, and stare at the screen.

According to the tracker, Ayla is here. In this hotel. Maybe she's at the pool, or on one of the other floors? I scratch my head, thinking.

And then I look over to the bed. My stomach lurches.

Sitting neatly on top of the covers is Ayla's tracker-collar, the metal cut open and bent. Next to it, a pair of bolt cutters.

I let out a roar of pure angst and frustration. All the stress, all the tension of the last few days, and now my light at the end of the tunnel is gone. And I only have myself to blame.

Steadying my breathing, I sit down on the bed. And that's when I see the note that Ayla left on the nightstand.

I am not just a prop to continue your legacy. I want a husband who values me, something you obviously never did. FUCK OFF.

My mouth is dry. I put down the note, hands shaking, and it's like my heart is imploding in slow motion.

I want a husband who values me, something you obviously never did.

Whatever resources I need to use. Whatever favors I need to call in.

Whatever God I need to pray to.

I will find my wife. I will make her mine again. And she will know exactly what she means to me.

Ayla

"Well, here's the cabin," says the man, using a mittenend hand to pass me the key. "There's a cord of wood stacked in the shed 'round the back. Should last you a good while, but just give me a call if you need more. You got winter clothes? It's gonna be a snowy one this year." He glances at my not-warm-enough jacket and bare hands.

"Not yet," I admit, "but I'll go to town and buy some tomorrow."

"My recommendation, get some cans of food, stuff you can heat on the wood stove. Never know when the power might go out, or if you might get snowed in."

"Thanks," I say, looking over at the four-wheel-drive truck I just rented. "I did a grocery run on my way here."

"Well, if that's everything, I'll be on my way. Welcome to Alaska, Mrs. Razone." He climbs into his own truck and drives off.

I stay there for a moment, surveying the snowy landscape. It's stunning. I'm surrounded by nature, with green trees swaying in the wind and snow-capped mountains behind.

My mind turns to my husband. My heart lurched when I saw the news reports of the killings at the Bover City Carnival. To my relief, his name was not among the reported victims. Was he involved with that? Was Colin Maroney killed by him, or on his orders? For all I know, the danger back home could be over.

Or Alessio could be locked in the middle of a brutal mob war.

If he's paying attention, he'll have seen that I used his credit card to buy a plane ticket. But since the ticket was in my name, he won't be able to find out the destination, even if he calls the airline. That gives me a head start. Now,

though, I've rented a car and a cabin. Those transactions, he'll be able to track.

I didn't want to tip him off like that, but I didn't have a choice. I'm cut off from my family's money, and I couldn't pay for this on my own. He'll be able to find me, whether I like it or not. I know that.

But that's assuming he has any interest in getting me back. And as much as I might enjoy the fairytale of him swooping in to apologize and tell me how much he cares about me, I know in my heart that it isn't realistic. He didn't even want to marry me in the first place. He said it himself.

Our marriage wasn't just an arrangement, it was an arrangement he didn't even ask for. Or want.

It hurts to think about. A lot. Maybe it was foolish, but when things felt real between us, I let myself believe it. I let myself believe in the fantasy of a man actually loving me and wanting me in his life. I thought I was Alessio's princess in the cute, Disney way, not in the traded-off-like-livestock-because-it's-politically-beneficial way.

Still, at least where I am now is more interesting than Boise. I've always wanted to see Alaska, and I'm all about the cozy, winter cabin vibe. No matter what happens, it's a cool experience to have before I start school in the fall.

My fingers are getting cold, and I can see my breath. I let myself into the cabin and turn on the lights, taking in the interior. Lincoln log walls face me from every direction, with a woodstove in the corner. It's definitely warmer than it was outside, but not by enough.

Time to build a fire.

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Alessio

I resist the urge to spike my phone into the ground. If one more fucking airport employee tells me that he can't reveal the destination of the ticket, even though it was purchased with my credit card...

Clenching my fingers, I refresh the page of financial transactions for the millionth time. Finally, something new shows up. Two things, actually. One is a car rental, the other a receipt for "Benson Family Cabins." It takes very little investigation to put a location to the charges:

Fairbanks, Alaska.

10 minutes later, I've purchased a planeticket.

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Ayla

It takes me three attempts and a YouTube video before I successfully get a fire going. Apparently, you can't just light a big log with matches and expect it to burn. That's the kind of thing you don't learn growing up in Bover City.

Once the woodstove is burning, the cabin warms up quickly. It's incredibly cozy. Having Alessio here to cuddle with would be nice. The thought makes me sad, so I turn my attention to the snow falling gently outside in the fading light. Tomorrow, I want to explore the wilderness around me.

I'm definitely going to need some winter clothes.

Thankfully, when I get up the next day, there are enough coals left from my fire that I don't need to start a whole new one. All I need to do is put a couple of small logs on top, blow some air, and it's burning again.

Breakfast consists of eggs and toast I bought on my way to the cabin yesterday. I cook the eggs on the wood stove, just for the novelty of it, even though the cabin has a kitchen and electricity. It makes me feel rustic.

Then I drive out to town to buy some winter clothes. I'm not used to driving in the snow, or on rural roads like this, but the truck handles it well.

"I'm looking for cold-weather gear," I tell the employee who greets me as I enter the sporting goods store.

"I can imagine," she chuckles, glancing me over. "You must be freezing. Where are you visiting from?"

"Bo-Boise, Idaho," I tell her, correcting myself quickly from saying Bover City. I'm sure it would be fine either way. But there's no sense giving more information than is necessary.

When I leave the store, I'm bundled up with a big ski jacket, warm gloves, a scarf, a hat, and a pair of new snow boots.

Alessio wouldn't even recognize me under all this gear.

I shake my head, trying to snap myself out of it. He isn't coming, Ayla. Stop trying to convince yourself he cares about you.

And even if he does come, there's no guarantee his feelings will be any different than they were before.

Wait, is that him?

My eyes land on someone in the distance wearing a dark jacket. His broad shoulders certainly remind me of Alessio. Is he looking at me? It sure seems like he's looking at me. I don't know if I want to go closer, or to run away.

I settle for walking slowly back to my rental truck, giving ample opportunity for the figure to approach me. He doesn't. Sighing, I throw my bag of purchases into the back seat and search my phone for a coffee shop to hunker down for the afternoon.

\*\*\*

90 minutes later, the snow is falling harder outside. I realize that if I don't head back to the cabin soon, it's going to be dark, and I'll be driving through thicker snow than I'm comfortable with. So I pack up my stuff, thank the barista, and go back to my truck.

I picked the right time. The weather is getting more intense, and there don't seem to be many people on the streets now. It feels like a storm is brewing. As I exit the city proper and get onto the rural road that leads to the cabin, the flurrying snow gets thicker, sticking to the pavement. I slow down, worried about losing traction and spinning out.

By the time I near the cabin, I'm in a full-on snowstorm. I drive as slowly as I can, breathing a sigh of relief as I see the structure getting bigger in the distance. When I park, I take a moment, breathing heavily. That was some sketchy driving. I'm lucky I left Fairbanks when I did.

At least I have snow gear. The way the weather is looking, something tells me I won't be driving anytime soon.

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That night, I lie awake in bed, watching the snow fall. I can hear the wind outside, and see the flakes in the moonlight flurrying outside the window. It's peaceful. The fire has died down, but the cabin is still warm. I probably won't be able to get to town tomorrow, but I have at least a week's worth of supplies with me here, maybe more.

Under the covers, my hand slides between my legs. I haven't come in days, not since my last time with Alessio. As my fingers circle my clit, I can't help but picture my husband, even though at this point, the memory is more bitter than sweet. His last words to me left such an ache in my stomach. But it's hard to fully accept that he meant them. There were too many signs, too many looks, too many moments. Too many things that indicated he had feelings.

If I felt what I felt, I can't believe it only went in one direction.

Right?

My mind flashes to the one scenario that truly does scare me. What if he does come to claim me, and there's no more warmth in his heart? What if he never changes, but he also never lets me go?

Squeezing my eyes shut, I do my best to perish the thought. He feels something for me, even if he doesn't want to admit it to himself. He had to. And if I'm wrong, well, I'll escape from him again. I'm good at that. I'll be prepared next time. Not so easy to catch.

Escape. Our time on the island looms fresh in my mind, especially the utter, deep loss of control he created after he caught me the second time. I was completely under his power then, with no agency of my own.

Fuck, something about that felt so free.

As my orgasm approaches, I imagine asking my husband for permission, and him making me beg. Finally, he grants it, and I tumble headfirst over the edge, pussy throbbing against my fingers.

Sadness hits me as my climax fades. What I just came to, I might never have again. If Alessio can't show me that I matter to him, I won't be begging him for anything, whether he tracks me down or not.

I can't believe how much snow there is on the ground the next day. It has to be at least a foot and a half. It's so deep that the idea of trying to walk through it would be absurd.

Good thing I used Alessio's credit card to buy snowshoes. I'm excited as I strap them over my boots, making sure they're nice and tight. I don't have a lot of experience with snow. This should be fun.

When I'm all bundled up in my warm jacket, hat, scarf, and gloves, I step outside. My foot sinks into the snow, just slightly, but I'm able to walk. I trudge out to my truck, which is completely covered.

Damn. I amverysnowed in.

Oh well. It's more of an adventure than a setback. I chose Alaska to enjoy a cozy cabin, right? Well, I sure got it. Time to explore the area, then come back inside and warm up by the fire.

Following what I can see of the road, I go in the other direction from the city. There are trees all around me, draped in white. I think the landscape is even more beautiful like this. There's such a charm to seeing everything completely blanketed, immaculate.

In the distance, I hear the sound of an engine revving. For a brief moment, adrenaline strikes through me: it brings me right back to being on the island, with Alessio on the quad bike. But that isn't possible, I remind myself. Not in all this snow.

But what could it be? It's getting louder. I didn't think anybody would be able to drive in this weather. Is it a snowplow?

And then asnowmobileappears over the next hill, a man in black winter gear with a matching dark helmet driving. My eyes search for nearby cover, but there's none to be found in the sea of white. I can't move quickly enough to reach the trees.

The driver turns his head and looks at me. The snowmobile slows, then changes directions.

Coming right in my direction.

I sprint as fast as I can in my snowshoes, heading into the woods that line the road. Behind me, I hear the snowmobile stop, and the driver's feet crunch into

the snow. I'm not able to move very quickly, but my desperate hope is that he moves even slower without any snowshoes on his feet.

My foot sinks as a shelf of snow collapses underneath it. I work frantically to pull it out, the crunching behind me getting louder. Finally, I work it free, just as a pair of arms wrap around my waist, clutching me firmly.

“Mine,” growls my husband, helmet muffling his voice.