

## THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

Ayla

It's only as I'm cuddling with Alessio in bed, the light fading outside, that I notice the bandage on his ear.

"What happened there?" I ask, pointing to it.

He flinches, as though worried I'm going to touch it. "It's nothing."

"Doesn't seem like nothing."

"Just a scratch."

"Just a scratch? Can I see it?"

He sighs, then sits up. "I guess I'm going to need to change the dressing anyway."

I raise my eyebrows. "Yeah, I guess you are. Did you bring first-aid stuff?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, sit on the edge of the bed. I'll help."

Alessio chuckles. "Yes, ma'am."

He moves to the edge of the bed, and I sit behind him. When I go to unwrap his ear, he flinches again.

"Can you stay still? I'm just going to unwrap it. I'll be gentle."

"Yeah. Just... be careful."

There's a vulnerability in his tone that I suspect previously, he would have tried to hide. I kiss the back of his head, then slowly, carefully, I remove the bandage.

My jaw drops. "Oh my god. What happened?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes, goddammit, I really do. We're going to tell each other things now, okay?"

I lean around him so we can look each other in the eyes. I need him to know that this matters to me. No more walls between us.

He nods. "Colin Maroney shot that hole in my ear on the Ferris wheel at the Bover City Carnival."

Instantly, I feel protective of my husband, and furious on his behalf. "How? Why?"

"Well, I knocked his gun barrel out of my mouth before he could shoot me in the brain. All things considered, I'd say it was an improvement."

I take a deep breath, feeling slightly sick. "I'm glad he didn't shoot you in the brain. More details. Why were you riding the Ferris wheel with Colin Maroney?"

He actually laughs. "I fucked up. Got cocky, figured it was safe. We had a meeting. I wanted to know if he planted the car bomb. He pulled a gun on me."

"I guess that answers that question."

"And quite clearly."

"I assume he's dead?"

"Along with several of his men, and his brother, who was his second in command."

“You did all of that in the last few days?”

He takes a deep breath. “Ayla, that moment where he had his gun in my mouth changed me. I realized that if I died then, you would never know what you meant to me. You would never know that... that I loved you.”

The tremble in his voice almost breaks me. I squeeze him, careful to avoid his ear with my face.

“I needed it to be over,” Alessio whispers. “So I finished it.”

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After cleaning and re-bandaging Alessio’s ear, we cuddle up together in the cozy chair in front of the fire. I sit on his lap, feeling wonderfully small as he holds me.

I missed this. So much.

Things are different between us now. I can feel it. There’s more openness to him. More willingness to let me inside.

“Can I ask you something?”

He blinks, as though I’m bringing him back from somewhere else. “Yes. I’ll try my best to answer.”

“Why did you decide to come back to the life? I know you weren’t working with your grandfather until recently. Then suddenly, you go and get made, become the boss, and marry me? What’s the story there?”

He scratches his chin, looking into the fire. “You asked me this the day I first brought you back to my penthouse.”

“I’m surprised you remember that.”

“I remember everything about that day. You want the short story, or the long story?”

“Let’s go with the long story.”

Alessio sighs. “It’s... complicated. The short story might be easier.” “We’re snowed in. I have time.”

He nods, as though accepting he’s not going to wriggle out of this one. “Okay, well... well, if you want the long story, I was always supposed to take over the family. After my father.”

I nod, intently focused. I haven’t heard Alessio talk about his father before. Or his past in general, really.

His voice is empty. “My parents were killed in a car bombing when I was 15 years old. It isn’t that much of a surprise, looking back. My dad was a total piece of shit, made lots of enemies. I never found out who did it.”

I’m almost lost for words. I knew his parents died, but not like that. I squeeze him. “Alessio, that’s horrible. I’m so sorry.”

“After that, I didn’t want anything to do with the Mafia life,” he continues. “I was on the track to get made young, and my grandfather wanted to groom me for leadership. But I threw it away. I refused to get made, did my work outside the family instead. My grandfather hated it, but he never tried to stop me. I’ll always love him for that. My father would have killed me before he let me leave.”

He’s trying to keep his tone emotionless, but I can hear the pain behind it. Suddenly, his emotional reaction after we were nearly killed by the car bomb makes sense. The way he shut off, closed himself down from me.

“You were trying to protect yourself,” I whisper. “From feeling that way again. When the Tesla-”

Alessio nods, and his eyes are shining. "I felt like I was losing them all over again. Worse, like I was going to lose you the exact same way. I couldn't face it. I... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed you away."

"It's okay," I tell him, choking up. I stroke his face, burying my head in his chest. "You have me now. And I'm not going anywhere."

He squeezes me for a long moment before he keeps talking.

"Anyway... you know your cousin, Dan?"

I squint, confused. What does my cousin have to do with anything? "Dan? Yeah... the one who died earlier this year?"

"I helped kill him."