

THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

“Okay. Wait. Excuse me?”

“So I used to have a business partner, Milo. Dan kidnapped his girlfriend.”

“He kidnapped her?”

“Yeah. Melissa. She left Dan for Milo. It’s a whole other story, but Dan was going to kill her.”

“Holy shit. My cousin Dan? I didn’t even realize he was part of the life.”

“He wasn’t. Neither were Milo or Melissa, or me, at that point. Which means we couldn’t touch Dan, or do anything about it. He was Anthony Gonzalez’s nephew, and I was Nazio Razione’s grandson, so we were both untouchable. But Melissa was nobody. Dan could do whatever he wanted to her, and your father would protect him.”

“So what did you do?”

“We had to get your father’s permission. He was willing to give up Dan’s location, in exchange for my grandfather giving him some valuable territory.”

“And your grandfather did it?”

Alessio’s voice is bitter. “Yes. For a price.”

“His price was that you would come back to the family,” I whisper, understanding.

My husband nods. “He wanted it my whole life. And he finally got it.”

“Did you resent him for it? Making you come back?”

He shrugs. "It cost him to give up that territory, so I understand it. But yes. I did. Our relationship was complicated, I guess. I do miss him now that he's gone."

I rest my head on his shoulder. "That was a big sacrifice you made. To rescue Melissa. You're a good person, Alessio."

"I'm not. But I'm loyal."

Ayla

I creep through the woods in my snowshoes, snowball in hand. Alessio is about 20 feet in front of me wearing snowshoes of his own, and he hasn't seen me yet. He's got a snowball in each hand, grinning as he searches for me.

Pushing down the branch in front of me, I wind up and throw. Alessio hears the creak and looks up, just in time to take the snowball to the chest.

"Ayla!" he roars, throwing both snowballs at me. They both miss, and I scoop new ones from the ground, pelting him. He runs forward and tackles me.

"Umph." I gasp as he falls on top of me and we crunch into the snow.

"Got you," he says triumphantly, putting a kiss on my forehead. "Ow, my ear."

"Get up," I whine, "it's cold down here."

My hair is caked with snow as he helps me up. I brush it off, giggling. When I look up, he's got a snowball aimed at me.

"Don't you dare! Don't you-aaagh!"

I dive out of the way, reaching for snowballs of my own. A few minutes later, we're both breathing heavily and covered in snow.

"Go inside and warm up?" I suggest, making eye contact with him.

He grins. "I won't miss a chance to get you out of that snowsuit."

Our gear dries next to the fire as Alessio strips me naked, collars me, and has his way. Weirdly enough, the collar doesn't feel particularly kinky here. It just feels natural. Right. He isn't rough with me, just dominating, just firmly in control.

It's surprisingly intimate. Like we're making love.

He finishes inside me, then slides my panties back up my legs and looks me in the eye. "Our stuff should be dry by now. Let's go snowmobiling."

I glance out the window. "Are you sure? It's getting dark."

"I'm sure. Trust me."

Riding the snowmobile in the fading light could be nerve-racking, but Alessio goes slowly, never outpacing the range of his headlights. I cling to him from behind, feeling the motor rumble through me.

I want to ask where he's taking me, but I don't think he can hear me over the engine. So instead, I just hold him and trust that he knows where he's going. He takes us up the road and to a clearing, then stops.

"Where are we?" I ask, taking off my helmet.

"There's a solar storm tonight," he says, removing his helmet as well. "I know it's pretty cloudy, but..."

"You want to see the northern lights," I realize. "That's... pretty romantic."

We stay on the snowmobile in silence, me holding him from behind. It's peaceful. I like this moment, northern lights or not.

And then, through a break in the clouds, a flash of green. We see it at the same time and both inhale, saying nothing. It shimmers above us as the clouds shift, not filling the sky, but unmistakably there.

It's enough to take my breath away.

"I'm so glad we got to see that together," I whisper.

He leans around and cups my face as we kiss. "I love you, Ave."

We both have cold ears and noses by the time we get inside. We shower together and I change his bandages.

"You're healing well," I remark, finishing the dressing. "Doesn't look infected or anything."

"Thanks," he says. "For looking after me."

"Of course. You're my husband."

The look of happiness on his face after I say that is priceless. I wish I could take a picture of it.

"Can I ask you something?" he asks.

"Of course."

"What did you mean when you said I'd been planning to marry you since you were a kid?"

I swallow. For some reason, this topic brings me a lot of trepidation. "I visited my dad in jail, and he told me."

"He told you that I'd been planning to marry you since you were a kid?"

"Basically. He said I'd been arranged to marry you since I was young."

He shakes his head, then turns to look at me. "I really, genuinely don't know anything about that. I found out our marriage had been arranged the same night you did, at that wedding. Do you believe me?"

I search his face, then nod. “Yeah. I do. Do you think my dad just made it up to get at me? Maybe it’s crazy to believe him, but it seemed like he was being honest.”

Alessio frowns. “I don’t know. My grandfather never told me anything about that. But then, he wouldn’t. Information was always on a need-to-know basis with him.”

We cook a late dinner together, pasta with a jarred sauce. As I’m straining the noodles into a colander, my phone buzzes. It’s a number I don’t recognize, but some weird instinct tells me to answer it.

“Hello?” I say, putting it to my ear.

The sound of my father’s voice almost causes me to drop the phone. “Hello, Ayla.”

Alessio glances at me sharply, noticing my reaction.

It’s my dad, I mouth, and put the phone on speaker.

I try to keep my voice steady. “Since when do they allow cell phones in jail?”

He cackles. “There are a lot of things they don’t allow in jail. Funnily enough, it isn’t a problem for me.”

“I saw they scheduled your arraignment. How are you going to plead?”

His reply is mocking, the words slightly slurred. “I will be pleading not guilty, of course. I am wounded, wounded, that my own daughter could possibly believe otherwise. A murder? How could you think me capable of such a crime?”

“Oh, I know exactly what you’re capable of.”

“I guess that means you and your husband will be watching your backs, then.”

I freeze, a chill coming over me. Alessio puts a reassuring arm around me, his face serious.

“You’re really going to threaten your own daughter?” I ask, trying to keep my voice from breaking. “The only kid you have?”

“What daughter?” he replies harshly. “You’re no daughter of mine. You fucked everything up. You were going to continue my legacy, and you ruined it. You ruined all of it. I could give a fuck what happens to you.”

I wish I could turn off the part of myself that cares about his words, but I just can’t do it. He’s still my dad. I choke back a sob as Alessio holds me, stroking my back. He makes eye contact, silently offering to take over the conversation. I shake my head.

“Funny,” I say, pulling myself together, “I remember when you told me that marrying Alessio would continue your legacy. I thought our children were going to inherit Bover City?”

“And how’s that going? Are you pregnant?”

“When I do have kids, you won’t ever meet them,” I practically spit. “They won’t even know who you are.”

“Then I guess you just answered your own question,” my father growls.

“You’re not my legacy, and your kids won’t be, either.”

“So why did you even call me? To give me a chance to gloat over the fact that you’re still in jail?”

“Maybe I just wanted to hear my darling daughter’s voice.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.”

Through the speaker comes a muffled noise that I’m pretty sure is a can being opened. Suddenly, the slur in my father’s voice makes sense. He was always

mean when he drank. Someone must have smuggled a six-pack and a phone into his cell, and he drunk-called me.

"You know, I hated the way things went down even more than you did," he says, his tone now surprisingly conversational.

"I'm not really sure that's possible."

"You sent me to jail. You really think you got it worse than I did?"

"Oh, you definitely have it worse. But I didn't send you to jail."

"If you say so. But your husband did."

I look at Alessio, realizing I don't actually know for sure that it isn't true. He shakes his head, shrugging.

"Believe what you want." I pause, then realize this might be the best chance I'll have to get more information on what he told me during the jail visit.

"Alessio isn't the one who arranged to have me married when I was a fucking kid. That was all you."

He laughs. "All me? All me? That shit was everybodybutme. Ask your mother. Ask your Uncle Jackie, if you can find where they buried him. God, that shit was a fuckingjoke. Fuck Alessio, fuck his grandfather, and fuck his worthless parents. Fuck your mother, too, while we're at it."

There's some kind of commotion on his end of the phone. A loud rustling, voices in the background. Then the line goes dead.

Alessio stares at me. "You have any idea what that was about? He was cursing everybody there at the end. I thought the pope was next."

"No. But I'd like to find out."

"So would I. What's the deal with your Uncle Jackie?"

“My mom’s brother. He died around the time I was born. Honestly, I don’t know much about him. We never talked about him much.”

“Was he part of the life?”

“Probably. My mom’s whole side of the family pretty much is.”

He takes a deep breath. “We should go home. I don’t expect much will come of it, but your dad sounded like he might have something up his sleeve. If he’s planning a move, I need to be in Bover City to handle it.”

“You don’t want to leave me here? Make sure I’m safely out of the way?” I adjust my expression quickly to make sure he knows I’m joking.

He shakes his head. “Chances are your dad was just bullshitting, trying to scare us. Either way, though, I’ll make sure you’re safe. I can have Sal put some men on standby to act as bodyguards.”

I kiss his cheek. “I like that better than having to hide out in Idaho. Or Alaska.”

My husband strokes my face, putting his forehead to mine. “I told you, Ayla. Nothing is going to keep us apart ever again. And I meant it.”