

## THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

Alessio

Ayla and I fly back to Bover City the next day, and sitting next to my wife on the plane makes me feel like such a fucking man.

This is the way things should be. With my woman at my side.

I almost lost this, but I didn't. I got her back. She's mine.

For real, this time. Forever.

I can't resist slipping my hand down the front of her tights as we're cruising at 35, 000 feet. She inhales, making eye contact, pretending to cuddle up under her thin little blanket.

"Yours," she whispers, then moans softly as I shift my fingers.

"Mine," I whisper back, feeling smug.

I cup her pussy with my hand for the rest of the flight. Occasionally, I give her soft lips a little stroke, or she squeezes me with her thighs. It feels so wonderfully intimate, so perfectly right.

Mine.

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Dominguez picks us up at the Bover City airport in the late afternoon. "Good to see you both," he says, shooting me a knowing look as he meets us at the baggage claim. "How's the ear? You're cleaning that thing, right?"

"It's healing." I can't help but beam at him as I put an arm around Ayla. Having my wife back makes me feel very proud. "And don't worry, Ayla is making sure I take good care of it."

Ayla hugs him. "Hey, Dom. Thanks for picking us up."

"No problem," he says, "I've got the airport pickup and drop-off down to a science, as you can see. Now, if you folks will follow me this way to the car." He motions sagely to the exit, pretending to be a travel guide or something.

"Sorry about all the airport shit," I whisper to him, pulling my suitcase through the parking lot. "It's because I trust you. And also, Ayla likes you. I'll have better work for you soon."

He shrugs. "Happy to do it. Nothing says 'career boost' like getting in some face time with the boss."

I chuckle. "Let's stop at Sal's club on the way home. I'll have him catch me up on anything important I missed while I was away."

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"Don Alessio!" Sal blows out a cloud of cigar smoke as I go into his office in the back of the strip club, Ayla and Dominguez following. He looks up from the football highlights he's watching on his computer. "Did you and your lovely wife have a good trip?"

"Yeah, it was great. How did it go mopping up after the thing with the Maroney crew?"

"Oh, it was no problem. They're running around like chickens with their heads cut off. We've taken back all the disputed territory in South Bover, and they're not going to do shit about it. Not after you took out Colin and Declan." He glances at Ayla guiltily, and then at me. "Sorry, wasn't considering my audience. Should we talk privately?"

“No. Anything you can say to me, you can say in front of Ayla.”

He looks surprised, but shrugs. “Whatever you say, boss. Anyway, things are all good here.”

“What about Anthony Gonzalez? Any issues with him? Anyone on the street still taking his orders?”

“Anthony ? Haven’t heard a peep from him since he got arrested, to be honest. I don’t think any of his old captains want to make waves. You handled the Maroney problem and you aren’t fucking with their incomes. Why would they mess with a good situation?”

“Just a hunch. Gonzalez called us from jail the other night. He was drunk, but it sounded like maybe he had something brewing. Tell your guys to be on the lookout, okay?”

“Will do. But I have to say, I don’t think it’s likely.”

“Still, can never be too cautious. Thanks, Sal. I slept easy knowing you were in charge while I was away. I think Ayla and I are going to head home now.” I start to turn, then stop myself, remembering. “Oh yeah, I wanted to ask you something. Did you know Ayla’s uncle Jackie back in the day? I know he was around during your time.”

Sal freezes. “Jackie? I don’t know, was he part of the life?”

“Pretty sure he was,” says Ayla. “Jackie Carbone, my mom’s brother. He died maybe 20 years ago. I’ve been trying to get more information about him.”

“Have you asked your mother?”

“That’s next, I guess.”

My capo looks uncomfortable. He throws me a look. “Maybe it would be better if we discussed this with just the two of us? Sensitive topics and all.”

I shake my head. "No. It's okay."

Sal glances at Ayla, and I get the impression that hereallydoesn't want to say this in front of her. "Sorry in advance, kid." He extinguishes his cigar, then turns back to me. "Okay, boss, here it goes. Yeah, I knew Jackie. He had beef with your dad."

I blink. "My dad? What kind of beef?"

"Your dad's kid cousin was doing business with Jackie. Don't remember the details now, but Jackie thought the cousin ripped him off. He beat him up pretty bad. Your dad was furious. I'd never seen Andres mad like that."

Even after all these years, I have to push down the emotions that surface at the mention of my father. Will the wound ever stop being raw?

"Anyway, Jackie came into one of our bars and was running his mouth about things. Andres and I decided to..." Sal's eyes flit to Ayla. "Well, we straightened things out."

"You straightened things out?"

He draws a finger across his throat. "Yeah. You know, we handled it. Actually, you were there, come to think of it. It was your 10th birthday. Always felt a little bad about that one."

A wave of nausea comes over me, and I have to swallow. I remember that birthday. The broken glass, the smell of blood, the taste of vomit. The awful sound of the cleaver.

"You murdered someone on Alessio's 10th birthday?" My wife clutches my arm, looking horrified.

Pieces of Jackie in a bucket. Dad standing over me holding a severed foot.

Sal looks embarrassed. "Andres thought he was old enough. Wanted him to become a man."

Next to me, Ayla is clearly sick on my behalf, and I hate it. I straighten up, modeling strength. “Thanks, Sal. One more thing. Do you know anything about my grandpa arranging me to marry Ayla? Like how or when he decided that?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry, kid. Old Nazio played things pretty close to the vest.”

Ayla

“You want help with your bags?” Dominguez offers, dropping us off at the penthouse.

My husband pulls a suitcase out of the trunk. “I’ve got them. Thanks again for driving.”

His friend hugs him and kisses him on the cheek. “Hey, things are coming together now. You’re the boss, and nobody wants to fuck with that. The Maroneys are out of the way. Ayla is home. Life is good. If you two change your minds about wanting to get a drink later, just hit me up.”

“Appreciate it,” says Alessio. “I think we’re just going to have a quiet one, but I’ll let you know.”

Dominguez and I hug and kiss cheeks. “Welcome back,” he tells me.

I haven’t even been gone a full week, but walking back into the penthouse with my husband still feels emotional. It’s the same lavish interior, same target in the hallway with a knife stuck into the wall next to it, but the context around everything has changed.

I’m different. And my relationship with Alessio is different. I don’t feel trapped here, or like I’m a visitor.

For the first time, I truly feel like I’m coming home.

“It was lonely, being here without you,” says Alessio, putting his arms around me from behind as I survey the living room. “It felt wrong.”

“Didn’t you live alone here for years before you met me?”

“Yeah. Emphasis on before I met you. I was a different person then. Now I barely recognize that guy.”

“What changed?” I know I’m fishing for compliments, but fuck it.

He squeezes me. “I found someone who makes my life so much better, I just want to be around her all the time.”

We stay there in silence for a moment. I’m still thinking about what Sal told us. I can’t get it out of my head.

“Alessio, I’m really sorry. About what you went through.”

He clears his throat. “What do you mean?”

“Your 10th birthday. What your dad... That’s terrible that you had to go through that.”

“It toughened me up,” he deflects gruffly.

“I’m sure it did. But you were 10. It wasn’t right.”

Silence. And then... “Thanks,” says my husband, holding me tightly. “I love you, Ayla.”

I turn around to kiss him. “I love you too, Alessio. So much.”

Our embrace is long, slow, intimate. When it breaks, he’s smiling. “I promise I won’t be committing any murders on our children’s birthdays.”

Outside the vague concept of our children inheriting the city, we haven’t really discussed this topic. And for the first time, the thought of having children with him brings a warmth to me. “Do you want kids?”

“For a long time, I didn’t. All I could picture was the way my father raised me, and it made me sick. But when I look at you... When I think of the life I want to build with you... Of course I want them. Of course I want to have a family with you. Do you...” He hesitates, looking more vulnerable than I’m used to seeing him. “How do you feel?”