

THE MAFIA'S OBSESSION

"Yeah. He also called me."

"He called you? On the phone?"

"Yeah. I guess he got a cell phone in there."

She furrows her brow, and I get the impression that he hasn't called her at all.

"What did he want?"

"I don't know. He sounded drunk."

"Well, you know better than to listen to him when he's drinking."

"I guess. Can you tell me about Uncle Jackie? I realized I don't know much about him."

She turns sharply away from the kettle. "Your father mentioned Jackie?"

I nod, noting the intensity of her reaction. "Mhm." I hesitate, then decide to put one of my cards on the table. "I know about how he died."

Her entire face changes. "You know... How do you... Oh. I suppose your father will have told you. He told you the whole story?"

I nod, not bothering to correct her. She gulps.

"Jackie was a good man," says my mom, looking wistful now. "I wish you could have met him. I know you two would have gotten along. He was a riot, my brother, such a practical joker. He would have been a great uncle."

The water reaches a rolling boil, and she busies herself pouring mugs of tea. I notice that her hands are shaking.

“Mom, when did you and dad arrange for me to marry Alessio?”

I had expected this question to land harder. Instead, her answer is immediate, and it confuses me: “It was about five years later.”

“Five years later than what?”

Her eye twitches as she hands me a mug. “After that scumbag murdered Jackie.”

That would put me at five years old when the marriage was arranged. I try not to look surprised. The more she thinks my dad already told me, the more she’s likely to reveal. “You sure kept that quiet my entire life.”

“Well, we had to, after what happened. Andres had lots of friends. It had to be a secret.”

Now I’m really confused. By Andres, I’m assuming she means Alessio’s father? “You were worried about Andres’s friends?”

She grimaces. “Obviously. Nazio Razione was out for blood after his son died. The arrangement was the only way we could smooth things over. It was your father’s idea, joining the two families together to keep the peace. Nazio would have killed me otherwise. We couldn’t allow word to get out that I was responsible for the bomb.”

For a moment, I’m dizzy and I have to clutch the counter. My mother set the bomb that killed Alessio’s parents? I try to act normal, ignoring the chasm that just opened up in my stomach. “I... see.”

“I did feel bad about the wife, you know. Julia wasn’t a bad woman, even if she was married to that piece of shit. I didn’t think she would be in the car with him. But you know, we all have our own mistakes to explain to Saint Peter when we reach the pearly gates. I avenged my brother, at least. I can’t regret that.”

She's speaking more openly now than I've ever heard her. Certainly not without a lot of wine. I get the impression she's been dying to talk about this, bottling it up for the last fifteen years of her life.

"Why did you wait five years?" I ask. "To get revenge for Jackie?"

She sips her mug of tea, almost spilling it. "When he first went missing, we didn't even know what happened. He just disappeared, no trail, no body. I mean, sure, we figured, but we didn't know who did it."

"How did you find out?"

A little smile creeps onto her face. "Somebody inside the Razione family tipped me off. Told me it was Andres who did it."

"And dad helped you set the bomb?"

She shakes her head quickly and half-chuckles. "Oh, no, he was furious. He told me I couldn't get revenge because hitting Nazio's son would be a death warrant. But it worked out, didn't it? Andres's dead, and we're still here."

"It worked out, except for the part where you arranged your five-year-old daughter to marry a gangster."

She snorts. "As though you wouldn't have done that anyway? We all marry gangsters, Ave. At least I guaranteed you would end up with somebody powerful, somebody who could earn. You're on top now, and your children will be on top. That's what matters. Even your father understood that eventually."